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# *The spring lady*

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## **THE SPRING LADY**









# THE SPRING LADY

*By*

MARY BRECHT PULVER

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

NEYSA McMEIN

INDIANAPOLIS

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# THE SPRING LADY

## CHAPTER I

IN WHICH THE SCENT OF ARBUTUS CONTENTS AGAINST  
VIOLET ORRIS—AND WINS

. . . I do not know what ails me . . . something, surely. I feel so restless . . . and I think so much. I, who never knew before I even had a mind. It's so odd. I was always so content to drift on the surface of things. Now . . . I am so dissatisfied . . . I hardly know myself.

Yesterday I played cards. In Amy Marshall's apartment. There were four of us—all my kind of women. The air was heavy with violets and cigarettes. Amy smokes like a fiend.

I never minded before but yesterday I said, "Let's have the window up, Amy, please."

She looked at me surprised.

"Does it seem close? You look pale, *cherie*. Let me burn this pastil."

It seemed more hateful even than the tobacco, but Amy dislikes fresh air so I said nothing more.

I waited until the rest had gone. Amy is so much older and has had so much experience. . . . I thought I'd talk to her a little.

She looked beautiful. She wore a new house-thing, four shades of purple chiffon, that seemed to reveal instead of clothe her lovely figure.

"Amy," I said—I hated somehow to begin—"have you ever thought about yourself? I mean—does—is it—are you perfectly happy—with this life, I mean?"

She looked at me a little amused.

"What's the matter, dear—you *aren't* well to-day. What does this mean—this pensive mood?"

"I'm perfectly well," I said, "but I—I've been thinking lately—"

"You mustn't think," she said quickly. "It

kills a woman's looks—and you don't get anywhere—”

“Perhaps not,” I said, “but it's a thing you can't control. Don't you ever think about—about—well, old age?”

This wasn't at all what I meant; in fact, I'm not sure what I did mean—it's so hard to express what I'm feeling—

Amy laughed shortly.

“Are you trying to be insulting?” Amy isn't really young, though she looks it. “If you are—let me tell you, my dear, *I'll* have nothing to do with old age. I intend to take care of my looks—my *age* stopped long ago.”

“I didn't mean that,” I said slowly, “but I've been wondering—one can't always go on this way, restaurants and theaters and clothes and things—and making ourselves nice to men.”

“Oh, one will have to die,” she conceded, “but let's not think about it.” She shrugged. “If one's careful—I've got enough staked by to keep me from the potter's field. It's not a bad idea in this spendthrift age—”



"Oh—*finances*," I shook my head; "I wasn't thinking of them."

"Perhaps you're getting strong-minded—or religious," she laughed. "Why don't you take up suffrage—or socialism. Seriously, dear—I believe you need a tonic. You're looking languid, and spring is always hard on one. You should have gone to Florida."

She didn't understand. How could she, when I don't know exactly what I wanted to ask her.

And she says she will not think.

Perhaps she is wise. I was much happier before this new self troubled me.

I tried to talk to Cora Bartram. Cora was playing with her little dog when I went in . . . kissing it and feeding it chocolates. . . . Somehow it disgusted me. Cora looks like a Madonna in a painting. She's out of drawing fussing over a dog.

She ran to get a new theater cap to show me. Silver lace with tiny pompadour roses.

Somehow I couldn't talk seriously—for a while. Presently I said:

"Cora, do you ever notice whether you're really happy?"

She seemed surprised.

"I don't think I have," she said; "I don't believe I've ever had time . . . things are so exciting. It's all I can do to keep Harry interested in me. He's so fickle—oh, I *know* he is—I know all about that Mrs. Wenham—not that I care so much about *him* . . . but I like his income . . . and with so much competition, . . . the stage, you know, and all that . . . a woman has all she can do to keep in the game. Sometimes things are quite *breathless*."

She nodded briskly and swung her pretty silk-clad foot lazily.

"What makes you ask such terrible questions, infant? You needn't worry. Your old Larry is crazy about you."

It wasn't Larry, I told her. I found I couldn't tell her, any more than Amy, what it was.

When I got up to go, she patted my furs lovingly.

"Do you know," she said, "I don't think I *am* happy at all—when I think of *my* sables. They don't compare with these. No, I shan't be happy until I get Harry to buy me new ones. My muff's all out this season, anyway."

And to think I was just like that a little while ago. Why, when Isabel Patton got her ermine coat I *couldn't* rest until I told Larry about it—and he bought me mine.

Now it seems strange—that you should eat your heart out for a mere thing to wear—a *thing*.

I didn't tell Cora, though.

I walked in the park a little afterward. I seldom walk, and it seemed nice—different.

Spring is late this year but you can feel it in the air. It soothes me. They're selling arbutus on the corners. They say it's lovely growing . . . but I've never seen it grow.

I hate my life.

## THE SCENT OF ARBUTUS 7

This morning I couldn't sleep.

It was early—before six—and I got up and stood by the window.

Usually I sleep until ten—for I'm up so late—but I just woke up and didn't feel sleepy. It's part of this funny restlessness.

I don't believe I ever saw the sun come up before. If I did I've forgotten it. I saw it come up now across the park. First the sky grew pale—a faint lavender, then it warmed up slowly—oh, just a touch of warmth, like warm flesh. It grew deeper and deeper until it was all bands of soft pink and tender violet. After a while the pinks alone were left and presently they turned a soft clear yellow.

It was beautiful. And all the trees with their delicate arms like lace against it. They're coming into bud now. It gives them a soft cloudy look.

I wonder why I notice them.

It's odd—this looking for air—for the outdoors—the country.

Except when I've flashed in a motor-car out to some gay road house, I've never been

in the country in my life. I don't know what it's like. All my life's been spent in city streets, going out to dinner, to plays, to shops, to dressmakers—riding up and down in elevators to somebody's flat—a life of hotels and apartments. Even my childhood was like this.

Strange, isn't it—the queer restlessness of these last few weeks. I *crave* the open country. I'd like to get out somewhere and put my face against the bare earth—and feel breeze, clean cold breeze, stir in my hair. How they would laugh—Larry and the others—if they knew.

Perhaps I wouldn't like it. But I'd like to try it.

While I stood at the window watching, a workman crossed the street below me, whistling.

He seemed happy.

A girl was close behind him—probably going to work somewhere. She looked neat and pink and independent.

Sometimes I think it would have been better if I'd known their kind of life. The nice get-out-and-hustle, early-morning life.

I looked down at the hand-made lace on my nightgown and thought of my soft luxurious bed behind me.

No, there would be things I'd not care for—I belong where I am, I suppose.

I'm a lap-dog woman. I've been a play-thing, an ornament, a decorative puppet for the last six years—ever since I married Larry.

But I'd been in training for it long before that. I was expected to marry luxury. Oh, I thought I loved him at the time. One usually goes into the thing with that excuse—but it doesn't exist any longer.

I hate him now. Yet I suppose I'd droop if he left me.

That's what this sort of life does to one.

I've never looked at myself from a distance before. But I'm seeing things in a new light. It's not moral—the way I'm living—my kind are living. I've never troubled about morals.

I've taken things as they come. But we're all wrong. We're a blot on the face of life.

We haven't even the excuse of being real society women—and we haven't the courage of our hardier sisters in luxury. We hide ourselves under a conventional pose. It *is* a pose, half the time. Sometimes I feel as though I should choke. I'd like to go away somewhere.

Larry came back to-day. It was my birthday, and he brought me the pendant I'd been coaxing him for.

He put it into my hand—a square-cut emerald on a chain of antique gold.

I was silent so long that he asked:

“Don't you like it?”

I looked up at him. I used to think Larry was handsome, even distinguished-looking, but to-day he looked hateful to me.

He stooped and put his arm around me. I could see every smallest pore in his face—Why do people have pores—or at least have to wear them so conspicuously?

I wanted to shriek, “I hate you. Don't

## THE SCENT OF ARBUTUS 11

touch me. I'm sick—sick of it all—and you.”

But I didn't. I kissed him instead and thanked him,—and I used to like to kiss Larry.

“It's beautiful,” I said.

It is.

It caught the light as it lay in my palm. And I forgot it was an emerald.

It looked like a little, tender new leaf—to me. It made me think of brook water, with wet stones and growing things dipping their little hands in it.

I must be insane. . . . If I could only get out. . . .

I can not bear it any longer. The restlessness—the choking is always with me. I want air—and the open country.

It haunts me. If I had courage—if I could take some little sleepy train into the countryside and get off at the first place I fancied—How absurd! And afterward? What should I do?



But I don't think of afterward. It's the getting there. One thing I'm sure of . . . I could sleep . . . afterward . . . even death wouldn't matter.

To-day I decided . . . this is the last time I shall write in this journal here. Perhaps never again.

No matter, I hate myself—I hate the life I live. . . . I am going. I shall leave Larry a letter. He will not find me.

I don't know where I'll go—

I'll just *go*. . . .

## CHAPTER II

WHEREIN A YOUNG LADY IS KISSED BY A GOOD-LOOKING  
POET AND LEARNS SOMEWHAT OF A MATTER WHICH  
MAY MEAN A HEARTACHE LATER

To those little hamlets that lie chaliced by the Catskill foot-hills the approach of spring is timid. So faltering and tentative are her overtures that if it were not for the despairing challenge of the inhabitants, backed by a progressive calendar, who disregard robin-snows, nipping frosts and swift cold rains, and resolutely begin to spade and plant, it is probable that the shy creature would never materialize.

On such a reluctant day of spring—mid-April, with wind-blown skies, roadside pools, ice-edged, and the brown earth and rotting leaves still moist with thaw, Cynthia Field knelt on an old rug beside Mrs. Alexander Stanford's cold-frame planting early lettuces.

In spite of an occasional touch of sun's

warmth, which had allured one or two shad trees on the southern hills to put on their bloom, the northerly mountains still wore a last thin, cold film of snow, and a cold breeze was blowing.

Mrs. Stanford, directing Cynthia's operations from the veranda floor, was muffled in a thick white-wool shawl. Cynthia herself was warmly and hideously clad in a black sweater, a man's heavy gloves and cloth cap. But the face she turned up to Mrs. Stanford's delicate faded one was like a June rose.

"The snow-drops have opened," she announced; "I saw them this morning—"

"Yes," said Mrs. Stanford absently, "I believe it's getting colder. B-r-r! Not too thick on that side, Cynthia. I wonder who's coming down the valley road?"

Cynthia lifted her head, then bent busily above her work, the curve of her cheek suddenly pinker.

"I think it's Paul Richter," she answered.

"Oh, of course; I wish he'd drop in, though. He comes so seldom. He never brings his

## A YOUNG LADY IS KISSED 15

verses any more. Get up, Cynthia—and wave to him.”

Cynthia rose a trifle stiffly and waved a thick woolen paw in the direction of the road which lay behind the bare rocking elms at the foot of the lawn.

“He won’t see *that*,” said Mrs. Stanford pettishly; “wave again. Here, take my apron—”

But this signal of distress proved unnecessary, for a young man turned suddenly in under her trees and came up the crooked garden path.

He was a big, wind-burned young fellow in brown corduroys, with an Irish setter loping behind him. At a distance he looked big, vital, dominant, with an effect of virile strength due to a fine strong physique, superb shoulders and carelessly masculine clothing. It was only at close range that the finer touches were visible—the soft, feminine-looking, curly hair at his temples, the small feminine nose and mouth, the expressive, long-lashed, blue eyes.

He took off his cap and smiled at Mrs. Stanford, with a mere glance for Cynthia who knelt suddenly with her nose in the cold-frame again.

"I was just waving to you," said Mrs. Stanford. "Why don't you ever come in? Don't you know an old woman gets lonely away off up the road here? Can't you come in now? Cynthia'll make hot tea and there's new gingerbread. It's so cold."

"You bet," he laughed, "if there's gingerbread. By the way, I'll just get your recipe while I'm about it—I'm not quite satisfied with mine. But I'm not cold. I've been going at too smart a clip. I've got a few tokens of spring, gentle spring, for the house."

He held up a great bunch of catkins and tasseled maple-twigs.

"See these pussy-willows," he laughed; "they're as soft as Cynthia's cheek." He turned suddenly and rubbed a velvety cluster against the girl's face as she stooped.

She looked up at him, her cheeks the loveliest color in the world.

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"Please," she said in a soft low voice.

"Please—what," he smiled; "will you have some? When you blush like that, Cynthia—I could wish we were back at school playing forfeits again."

"Please," said Cynthia again.

"Don't talk silly, Paul," said the older woman. "What's the news in the village?"

Then as he held up his hands in pretended horror:

"Well, aren't you writing anything any more? You used to make such lovely verses—and your housekeeping? Mercy! When I think of you *alone*, and what things must be like, I'm sometimes tempted to send Cynthia right down to straighten you out."

"Cynthia," he began lightly—then turned gravely and regarded the girl—"why, Cynthia wouldn't come; she hates me."

"Paul—" said the girl, but he was no longer paying attention.

"I don't write any more because I lack inspiration. The muse isn't kind. Things seem stale—my last three poems, to be exact, have

been refused by every reputable editor in existence—this isn't a poet's age. I'm going to become a chauffeur. I think I'll have just one more try—I got an idea to-day. . . . Perhaps you saw her, too. I passed her below the Marshfield place, going down the road alone."

"Who? A woman?" asked Mrs. Stanford.

He looked away a moment toward the blossoming southern hills, his face softened, mystical, in expression.

"The most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he answered slowly. "Oh, a young woman too, a mere girl. There was nothing remarkable about her clothes except that she was splashed with mud literally from head to foot—"

"And you call that pretty?" asked the other.

"Oh, but wait—her face. Such a face! It's the kind to haunt a man forever—the expression. It took my breath away. I've never seen such—*happiness* in a face. I wonder—I passed her squarely face to face

## A YOUNG LADY IS KISSED 19

and she never saw me. Her eyes seemed to look beyond me—through me.”

“She must have had good vision—this happy creature with the muddy petticoat,” said Mrs. Stanford with a wry smile. “We didn’t see her, did we, Cynthia? You’d better come in now.”

“Ah,” he smiled, “you wouldn’t have known if you had seen her. ‘Jonquil-haired, and eyes like moonlight,’ ” he hummed in a mellow tenor, as he followed her in.

Cynthia had already slipped in by a side door and in a few minutes came back to busy herself with a smoking teapot and cups of Cantonware.

The gingerbread in thick rich cubes tempted the poet’s sensitive nostril, from a convenient platter. He yielded to temptation with fearful rapidity.

“Our Cynthia can bake,” he smiled, sinking very white teeth into his fourth piece.

“Oh, she’d make a good wife,” conceded the older woman.



Richter cried out:

"Now, don't spoil it. Don't begin match-making. I won't have her. She wouldn't do at all for me—and Cynthia, mercy!—she wouldn't have the likes of such a sloven around. We're only Platonic friends, aren't we?"

Cynthia laughed and nodded.

"Only that," she said; "it's only natural for a girl to—to look for an ideal."

Richter frowned solemnly.

"I'm not sure that I fancy that remark. Yes, thanks—I will have more. My excellent Cynthia, you are at least *my* ideal—in housewifery. So much so—this gingerbread moves me to such emotion—that I salute you in the presence of a witness, a very queen of cooks—"

And suddenly, carelessly, half-mockingly, he leaned forward, and tipping Cynthia's chin upward with one forefinger, he brushed her lips with the briefest, slightest kiss.

"I—I—" Cynthia's voice strangled—her face turned suddenly white.

## A YOUNG LADY IS KISSED 21

Mrs. Stanford's cup crashed down on her saucer.

"I must say—" she began.

"Pooh!" said Richter. "Platonic friendship. You perceive how immune we are to any suggestion of anything else. Besides I've kissed Cynthia before—we've exchanged kisses. In the games of our infancy. How many times should you say at a venture, Cynthia, have I kissed you? Twelve?"

Cynthia, her startled eyes downcast, her cheeks warm, again tried to make a reply in kind, but her lips twisted slightly and her breath troubled her, so that she accomplished only a few inaudible words. Anyway, it did not matter, her answer; for Richter, with some laughing remark, was already smoothing the expression of outraged propriety from Mrs. Stanford's brow and was launched upon some recent village exploit. Cynthia let them talk. It was not her habit to be garrulous. She sat now with her face partly turned away, her hands quiet in her lap.

The north light, glowing through the bay-

window, threw the old-fashioned walnut tones of the room and the little group of three into definite light and shade like a subtly arranged set of studio lights. It shone pleasantly on the somber old furnishings, the white linen and silver of the tea table. It picked out Mrs. Stanford's shawl, the gray-white of her face, the thin nervous hands with the heavy black-and-gold ring—the warm tints of Richter's face and hair—and Cynthia.

She sat in its fullest revealment, a quiet country-bred girl in a badly made, dark blue frock and no one—the two chatting so busily, Cynthia least of all—realized that she was the masterpiece in the studio—a creature fashioned of soft grace and sweetest coloring. To Mrs. Stanford she was just a pleasant, well-behaved, nice-looking girl whose service was always gracious and willing. Paul Richter saw her as a pretty girl whom he had teased and played with most of his early life and whose prettiness bore through its very accustomedness no hint of novelty or excitement.

He was a somewhat important person

both to himself and this little hamlet in the hills.

His family together with the Stanfords and the Franklins conserved in their persons all of the aristocracy that the place had ever known, and if there is a more aristocratic aristocracy than the "first families" of a country village it is yet to be known. The fact that out of their setting of petty autocracy, they would rank, in a larger place, only with the prosperous grades of butcher, baker or candlestick-maker weighs not at all with them. The firstlings of an Iberian village count themselves on equal footing with those of Rome, and there is a certain thrill of fellow sympathy in the breast of Mrs. Jones, wife of Sweethills' banker, when she reads of the social doings of Mrs. Vanderbilt or Mrs. Astor, as of one who holds the keys—though on a smaller scale—to the inner circles.

The Stanfords and the Franklins had retained their old family homes rooted deep in the traditions of 1850, but Richter, last representative of his, had sold out and lived by

himself in a modern bungalow at the foot of the valley. Had he been a woman, tradition would have been outraged, but much is forgiven a man romantically handsome and a poet to boot. He was looked upon as the local authority in matters of all kind, but chiefly those of dress, society and literature. He spent six weeks of every winter in New York and was supposed, a supposition he shared, to have an intimate acquaintance with all it contained.

He and Mrs. Stanford, as members of a common order, met on a common plane in their discussion.

Cynthia was not expected to intrude. She did not belong to the aristocracy—her mother having eked out an ill-provided widowhood by baking pies and bread and the immortal “fried cake” dear to the Yankee New Yorker.

But she might listen if she chose, and she chose—to one voice at least. But in the very middle of a flourishing period of Richter’s a subtle change came over her pose. From where she sat she could see the whole wet road,

through a cleft in the trees. It stretched away to the hills, where to the west now a pale wintry-looking sun shone with languid warmth.

Directly in the middle of it, in the path of these tepid sun-rays, a figure had appeared. It was a woman, walking. She was slender and tall and carried her head well up as if she gloried in the wind touch on her face.

As she came into the sunlight she seemed touched with a faint gilding. It limned her figure like the leading in a glass window. When it touched her head it stopped and kindled in a sudden blaze of pale gold. She was walking bareheaded. She was too far distant for Cynthia to distinguish anything but that.

But she knew. This was the girl of whom Richter had spoken—whom he had called the most “beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” Even at this distance a certain distinction clad the figure—

She was no ordinary tramp or walker of the roads. Cynthia’s eyes widened as she watched.

Something—some vague portent touched her breast. What part was this figure to play in her life?

Instinctively, she felt it was to mean something to her. Deep in her heart, unguessed by any other, a timid half-fledged hope had bloomed. It had warmed monotonous days for her, kept sweet her simple life. Watching now she felt an odd coldness at her breast as though this hope had suddenly been slain.

## CHAPTER III

CONCERNING AN OLD HOUSE LONG ADREAM BY ITSELF,  
AND ITS WELCOME TO ONE WHO COMES TO LOVE  
IT GREATLY

So many years had passed since the "old Ford place" had been tenanted that no one ever expected to see it occupied again.

It is true that a "For Sale or Rent" sign peeped out from behind its rusty, irregular cedar hedge—or what had been such a sign in earlier days.

But it had become a mere ghost of itself long ago—a rain-blurred, weather-worn legend that might have spelled anything—that careened tipsily on the stake and served merely to mock the silent shuttered dwelling it guarded.

The house, once so busily and happily haunted by Fords, big and little, was over a hundred years old—and looked it. It was



built of timbers such as one does not see now, aristocrats of timbers cut from the very hearts of slaughtered forest giants. But this was its only architectural distinction. Its style was the abominable so-called "colonial"; its color a vague green. For the rest it was low, a single story-and-a-half, and so long weathered and unpainted, that in its jungle of close-clasping shrubbery it looked more like a great mossy boulder than a dwelling.

Once or twice of late years summer campers had been known to force its shelter for a few days, and the children of the neighborhood liked to forage for blossoms there, but it knew no other life. It was a dead house, a place of memories, of rank and fecund overgrowth, that annually in the warm months lifted it into signal notice, only to leave it bare and forgotten the rest of the year.

For the old Ford house kept vigil among such flowers as no other garden knew.

It was here that one might find those quaint, rare, floral treasures that decorate the faded

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yellow pages of our grandmothers' albums and samplers—familiar of simpler times, now almost forgotten. Gillyflowers, rockets, strange bearded moss-roses, larkspur and prince's-feather, trillium and "honeysuckles."

In June, when the spider-legged apple trees put on pink and white flounces and the rotting colonial porch lay shrouded with passion-flower and clove-scented climbing-roses; when the bleeding-hearts bled and the tall day lilies waved, and the hollyhocks, and the four-o'clocks and the stately phlox and pinks and lemon verbenas and love-in-a-mist bloomed and blazed, the place was an exposition of flowerhood, to which all the bees and birds and little country breezes and fat country babies had tickets free.

They had had loving tendance—the forebears of these blossoms. It was perhaps this that had encouraged their descendants to go on bravely blooming. Or perhaps in the dusk the spirits of those early horticultural Fords walked in their old garden again. It

may be they gave it sustenance of a finer kind than other flowers got—that heavenly dews poured from their ghostly watering-pots.

For surely no man is wholly damned who has loved his garden and watched his Lord's revealment in its leaf and bloom. Whatever the reason, this old greenery woke first to the promise of spring and even on this illusive moody day of April looked like a herald of summer. Behind the tall evergreen hedge its soaking lawn lay glistening green and bright, pied with a dozen slender spears of mauve and gold which to-morrow would be crocuses, advance guard of a mighty army. In another place tiny crimson fingers pushing upward told of tulips soon to come, and close to the worn old porch steps, braving wind and weather, like a handkerchief of lace, lay a patch of lion-hearted little snowdrops.

The place was full of mystery, sentient with tiny life-pulses, mystic with shoots of delicate green, and the faint promise of rich leaf and bud life.

Under the western sun it lay quick and vital

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—a very jewel in the arid setting of the March-sealed countryside. And while the sun still lingered on it, there came one with hungry eyes and an open heart for its largess.

A rusty iron hoop held the sagging gate to its lopsided post, and this the visitor lifted to admit herself. Straight up the old stone path she came to the porch steps. Here she sat down, her feet among the snowdrops and her eyes turned to the western hills where the sun-colors still glowed faintly.

That she did not belong to the countryside was obvious from a mere glance at her.

She was different—some strange intangible quality marked her as metropolitan, even here in the hill country, and in spite of the border of soiled untidy moisture on her skirts. It was not her clothes nor the little bag she carried—though they, plain but rich, spoke of deft fingers that wrought far afield from this spot.

Her face beneath the heavy mass of light hair was pale and lovely. Fatigue had whitened her cheeks but her lips were very red

and her eyes, large, shadow-set, long-lashed, caught the sun-rays until they shone starry.

Her hair was her glory. One could fancy it unbound, a very Danae shower of gold. Loosened now, its soft masses dropped down to make a tender frame for the sweet thinness of her face.

She was thin as well as tired-looking, with a delicate frailty of figure that suggested hot-house blooms or Dresden china.

She smiled as she sat in this old garden and once or twice stray phrases escaped her lips. Once she said, "I don't care—I wanted it so," and her face grew wistful. Then she sighed, "It's just what I thought it was. But I've never known it before."

Presently when the sun crept lower she realized she was growing stiff and cold and she looked up at the silent house behind her. "I think I'll sleep in you to-night," she said, as to a friend.

She got up and went to the front door and tried it. It was locked, of course, nor would it yield to her slight strength. She looked at

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it, balked. "I wonder how one burgles," she said. "I'm a tramp, but I don't know anything about felonious entry—"

She went to the rear. There were two side doors, both as secure as that in front, but a low, green, wooden door at the end of the place was fastened only by a wooden staple thrust into a rusted bar. The staple resisted her for a little but yielded presently, and she went in.

The door opened only to a small dark woodshed, a cubby filled with odds and ends of old garden tools, wood shavings, thick woolly cobwebs and a pile of old straw in a corner. Yet its odor was not unpleasant; it smelled pungently of wood, an odd resinous odor she had never smelled before.

The walls were full of old rubbish and household trash and a door at one end gave into the house proper. But this too defied her. "There's nothing but this," she thought, looking around her in the dim dusty place.

She poked at the straw with her foot. She was too ignorant to know what it was, but

judged it was hay. "I could sleep in this hay," she thought; "why not—I'm dirty enough, and so tired—"

A tiny furry creature squeaked suddenly and darted away across her foot. It set every nerve of her a-tingle and for the first time she felt afraid of the coming night. Then nature intervened. She had walked since the early morning and every muscle ached and cried for rest.

She slipped out of her shoes and wet skirt, and wrapping herself in her coat burrowed deep in the straw. It was warm and comfortable. The shed door, which fastened only on the outside and was badly warped, had stuck, leaving an opening nearly three inches wide.

The keen sweet air of early evening blew in now, bringing a thousand vague, tender scents—or shadows of coming scents.

Spring was in the air, and a spring night sky above. She could see through the opening a narrow strip of it. A little silver moon came out and one or two stars—the near-bright

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stars of the hill country. Something in their look made her think of odd things—things that had played no part in her life—vague, half-heard-of—the Christmas Star and the Shepherds and Bethlehem.

She watched them long, awed. Presently a quiet, little cloud finger reached across the door and touched the stars. She watched that, too. The sweet air filled her nostrils; it stung her eyelids.

Quite suddenly, like the touch of a gentle hand, sleep came to her. The dreamless boundless sleep of out-of-doors. . . .



## CHAPTER IV

### DEMONSTRATING VARIOUS METHODS OF FIRE-BUILDING, AND THE EVOLUTION OF A MEAL

THE sun awakened her. It fell like a bar of gold into the dusty shed and opened her eyes.

She could hear a vague rustling sound outside and she lay still a moment watching a prism of dust motes dance in the sun-ray.

Then she was conscious in turn of being watched. She turned her head slowly and over her shoulder met the steadfast gaze of two small, beady black eyes very close to her head. The effect was hypnotic, and the two exchanged a long measuring glance. There was something defiant, too, in the gaze of the beads, then as the human intruder made a slight nervous movement there came a shriek and a squawk, and a bundle of agitated

feathers hurled itself out of the straw through a hole in the wall.

Close at her hand lay an egg, a warm brown oval that recalled her suddenly.

She picked it up and rose, bits of straw clinging to hair and clothing. "I'm hungry," she said, looking at the egg. "I don't think, though, I could eat a raw egg."

She went to the door.

The rustling she had heard was the swaying of the trees under the wind. But it was a west wind, warm and summery, and the sun was high and bright.

Through the clear air she could see the hill outlines clearly, fold after fold receding in the distance, the nearest touched with a pale, awakened bud verdure, the farthest, melting into blue haze.

Everything looked bright and scrubbed. And suddenly she realized how dirty she was—and how thirsty. Then she saw that right at her hand lay the cure for both: an iron pipe set in stones from which a rill of water dripped.

The touch of it shocked her—it was so bit-

ingly cold, but she laved her face and hands in it clumsily and dried them on a handkerchief from her bag.

There was nothing to drink from, and it took some time before deep in the hidden recesses of her brain she evolved enough mother-wit to cup her hand and drink from it.

It was a clumsy process all through and left her drenched and chilled. When she had done she was conscious of both cold and hunger.

She looked at the egg she held, then back at the house—then off down the April valley where the country showed that she was innocent of any near neighbor.

For just a minute, half closing her eyes, she had a vision of a hot bath, fresh lingerie, a blue negligee and a breakfast tray—silver, with coffee and rolls—and yes, an egg, but piping hot, reposing in a fragile china cup, and a faint doubt touched her face. "Perhaps I've lost my mind," she whispered; "I must be quite insane."

These reflections, however, were of no as-

sistance now and she turned back vaguely into the wood-shed.

Close to that cobwebby inner door hung a key—a king of keys, huge, black and clumsy, tied up for heaven knows what reason with a bit of blue rag. At first she half-doubted it was a key—it resembled a hammer as much as it did anything. Then she took it down and tried it in the lock.

She could not move it for a little, but after some reddening exertion it gave and she half fell into what appeared to be a kitchen. It was covered with a thick carpet of dust and the inevitable cobweb drapery, but a small rusty stove with sagging pipe, a lopsided table and a chair without a back furnished it—testimony of some last year's camping invasion.

A ragged stub of broom stood in a corner and on the table were a couple of rusty tin pails, a stub of candle and a box half filled with matches.

It was the matches that decided her.

She looked at them a long moment, at the

old gaping stove; then down at the egg she was carrying. The chain of reasoning was complete.

These objects represented the logical steps toward the meal she craved—craved with a sharp-fanged longing she had never known before. But beyond the fact that eggs were to be eaten cooked and needed water for the process she knew nothing. A stove, fire, a cuisine, were problems she had never faced in her shielded life.

Of course, to cook, a fire was required, that is, if there was no gas-range. But there appeared to be no gas-range. Obviously a fire must be built, but how? How did people manage in the farthestmost outposts of civilization?

She racked a brain that had known but little racking and vaguely recalled stray hints, memories, fragments from her reading, pictures, etc. Where there was no other way people went out and got the fuel themselves—from trees, of course. One must take what nature furnished. This thought was the final

link, and she suddenly hurried, triumphant, to the back garden.

It took but a few moments to fill her arms with young apple and lilac boughs. She tore them off with vandal hand, getting a shower of water-drops in the doing.

It took but little longer to pack them compactly into the stove's maw, drop in several lighted matches and sit down to wait. But after an interval it was apparent that nothing was going to happen. She took off a stove lid and peered in. The boughs had not altered materially and a pucker of doubt creased her forehead.

She put in more matches—one or two she held close against the twigs, letting them burn to the very end. "What's the matter?" she asked petulantly. "It doesn't seem to burn. I wonder if they're too wet—"

Perhaps that was it—but where could she find anything dry with all outdoors pearled with morning mist. Then she thought of the little shed, and she hastily extracted the green boughs and went for fresh fuel. In the cor-

ner she dimly remembered seeing wood piled. It was gray with dust—impeccably dry.

It was very stout, too—in fact it was the knotty remnant of an uncut cord. The exertion of carrying in the heavy lengths was a severe tax. However it only required three to fill completely the fire box.

With a couple of burning matches as the *pièce de résistance* success must surely crown this effort. But she had gained nothing. There was no fire.

Realizing it, her first course was to throw herself down on the dusty chair and give way to tears. But when these had been wept the thing stood as before, and she got up and attacked the stove anew.

She took out a length of wood—she took out two. But why go into it all? She had to reach back through long-lapping layers of civilization to that earlier primitive era when man coped untaught and single-handed against natural forces and an immensity of ignorance.

She had to use her wits and summon forth

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what instinct she possessed. It was not easy. When a woman has met elemental forces all her life by merely pressing a button it is not surprising she makes stupendous, unfathomable blunders. Fortunately the matches held out. When she had wrestled to the stage where common sense and experiment had taught the need of small kindling, of which the shed offered plenty of odd scraps, and some management of drafts, there were still a dozen left in the box.

When she had lighted her first real fire, she had still to keep it. It was only after it had died three times that she managed to hold a core of flame together.

Her cheeks were flushed now; her eyes bright. A streak of soot grimed her fair cheek; her nose was like a chimney-sweep's and she was desperately tired, but a fighting spirit had roused itself in her. "I'm like Robinson Crusoe," she thought, as she set a pail of water on to boil, the precious egg reposing within. "It's like being a pioneer."

She went to the door and let the air cool



her cheeks. The watch on her wrist had stopped, but the sun was high and she heard bells ringing, then a whistle.

It was noon probably.

It occurred to her that a solitary egg was a rather slender banquet. "In stories people eat roots and berries," she said, "and in a country garden there must be something." She gave no thought to the season; her city table held hothouse vegetables the year round.

But though she knew a salad, romaine or endive, instantly, when served as a course; and potatoes from a soufflé to a garnish for crown roast, she had nothing to guide her as to growth. She had to rely on her eye—or so she thought. And she paused first by those plump, pink, tulip fingers thrusting upward.

Quite likely this was a kind of asparagus—she would taste it and see. To a small supply of this she added another titbit growing near by—pale, yellow-green, tightly rolled spirals that somehow struck her as appetizing. She pulled a half-dozen of these. They were

## THE EVOLUTION OF A MEAL 45

newly fledged brakes that grew yearly like a tropic jungle on the north side of the house.

Rambling farther she came upon the vegetable garden proper, sown occasionally by a neighbor to an indifferent crop. She was more fortunate here. A parsnip which had weathered the winter caught her eye. She did not know it in its street dress but she added it to her supply.

While the egg was cooling she boiled these in turn. The greens were not a success either in flavor or consistency, but the parsnip, more or less underdone, she ate greedily. The fact that her meal was saltless touched her little.

When she had finished she put on more wood and heated water in the pails for further ablutions. While this was going on she explored the silent darkened house. It was a string of empty low-ceilinged rooms, the light filtering through the shutter chinks or stopped entirely by an occasional shade of faded paper bordered with some quaint painted scene. Here and there a forgotten piece of furniture

stood, a rush-bottomed chair, a scrap of rag rug—in one room an old bureau cupboard with half the glass knobs gone.

In one of the slant-ceiled upper rooms she found a bed,—a corded painted thing with a tick thrown over it. The tick was stuffed with dried balsam boughs and had probably served some camper's purpose also. It gave a faint spicy odor.

She sat down on this a little. "If I had a blanket I could sleep here," she mused; "a blanket and some matches and bread and candles. Why, one could stay here weeks and no one ever know—I don't know why I came . . . I *must* be mad. . . . But oh, I can't go back—I can't go back—not until I've thought about it—and know what I must do. . . ."

Her face was suddenly tragic in the shadowed room, but gradually it grew peaceful. It was so still in this dusty, memory-filled house—so suggestive of sweet, old-time, homely occupation. "I could wait until later and go back to the little shop I passed in the town and get things. . . . I could stay here

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and he could not find me . . . and I could see things grow. . . .”

She stood a long time looking out of a window. Already she felt a brave self-reliance and a swift possessive tenderness for this sweet-growing old place.

And she felt very secure in her retreat—like a person in some sweet sanctuary. No one should guess where she was.

She could not know, of course, of the swift wireless telegraph of the countryman nor that her chimneys had these many hours like ancient signal fires told all the countryside that some one was “up to the old Ford place to stay.”

## CHAPTER V

RELATING TO THE COLOR OF HAIR AND A PURCHASE OF  
CANDLES; TO MR. PORTER VESSEY'S SUTLE SMILE  
AND AN ERRONEOUS CONCLUSION

MR. PORTER VESSEY, who represented the electorate of Sweethills in the state legislature, was not of the aristocracy. His wife, however, had been a member of the Stanford family and this, together with his local political prestige, encouraged a favorable opinion of him.

His wife no longer lived, and Mr. Vessey presided over a large, comfortable and obviously crippled establishment. No one, least of all its owner, denied its crying need for a feminine hand at the domestic tiller, and there were a large number of unacknowledged candidates scattered through the town. Mr. Vessey however acknowledged only two—and this only in his heart of hearts.

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He was a large personable-looking man approaching middle life. He was seldom seen except in a frock coat, and for some unfounded reason, based on a wholly erroneous belief, fancied he resembled William Jennings Bryan, whom he greatly admired. The resemblance went no further, however, than Mr. Vessey could make it by means of carefully imitated hats and neckwear.

Though handsome in a big impressionistic manner, the details of his face picked out at leisure, the loose and watery eye, the prominent, embarrassed-looking ears vitiated the general conclusion.

There was nothing embarrassed about Mr. Vessey himself; at no time did he permit anything to scratch the irreproachable surface of his bluff, hearty, confident, amicably condescending statesman's manner—the best he could obtain at Albany.

It was no affair of state or general moment that slightly clouded his brow this soft April evening as he came down the main street of Sweethills. It was a matter of gentler texture.

Twenty minutes earlier he had been chatting on the street with Mrs. Floy Harmon. Mrs. Floy was one of the two matrimonial candidates Mr. Vessey admitted. He had never given her any inkling but the lady seemed to feel something intuitively. It would have been difficult to prevent her.

Mrs. Floy was supersensitively inclined to admiration. She was a widow ambiguously "past thirty," but handsome in a fine florid way. She had go; she had snap; she had ginger; she had a fine figure, of the compact matronly curves Mr. Vessey admired; she had handsome gray eyes and a clever, not-too-delicate wit. She had also, like most village women over thirty, very bad teeth and showed rather ill in a smile. But Mr. Vessey, whose own personal care was not a "'phobia," did not at all mind this. In fact he had left Mrs. Floy with a feeling that she was after all best adapted to grace the big mustard-colored Vessey residence—when he ran square into the other candidate.

Yesterday Cynthia Field had been a little

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inconspicuous schoolgirl but to-day Mr. Vessey with a quickened heart-beat felt a connoisseur's thrill before her. She was so fresh—so softly colored—so young. Before these qualities Mrs. Floy's charm rather dimmed until he recalled how much slimmer she was than Mrs. Floy. She might never fatten up, and pulchritude of woman was to Mr. Vessey in proportion to embonpoint.

He admired them both—he wanted both, to tell the truth. But this was not Utah, and after the profound bow and benevolent greeting to Cynthia, who, flushing, would have avoided him, he went on with a perplexed mind.

That was a charm of Cynthia's, too—that shy reticence. The little thing was too bashful really to show her feelings like Mrs. Floy, who came half-way and came early at that.

Still cogitating, he dropped into Brownlee's store, since there was no immediate need for settling the problem. As he opened the door he brushed into a customer who had entered before him, a woman who seemed to hesitate



slightly before advancing to Sol Brownlee's overcrowded and ill-assorted counters.

No woman, unless she was minus a head, escaped at least a fleeting glance from Mr. Vessey. And this one he observed not only had a head, but a handsome one at that. He watched her make her purchases, with a careful and unembarrassed scrutiny that left out no detail.

She did not belong in these parts, her dress told that; Mr. Vessey's experiences at the capital had taught him some discrimination in these matters. She was also too thin to conform to his ideals, but her face was more than interesting—it was exciting, and when he had analyzed as far as her hair, he was afire with a delightful sense of adventure. Mr. Vessey felt that he knew hair—almost as well as he knew women—and if such hair grew anywhere except in a bottle, he'd eat his winter coat.

But though he had her classified and pigeon-holed in less than three minutes, to his complete satisfaction, her purchases somewhat

baffled him. There was something inconsistent in a peroxide beauty buying coffee and candles and a pair of cotton blankets. Even Sol Brownlee's fervid efforts to force conversation, which Mr. Vessey did not at all hesitate to attend, gave him little information.

"You be the lady that's a-stayin' up to the old Ford place, I take it," he remarked amiably.

The golden-haired stranger's hand fluttered up to her throat nervously. "The old Ford place?" she repeated.

"Eyeh. Guess you didn't know it was called that. B'en in the Ford family so many years it ain't got no other name round here."

"No—I didn't know it was called that—"

"I seed yeh goin' through town yest'day. Cal'late you found the old place some dirty. Be you goin' to stay all summer?"

"I—I don't know," she hesitated.

Mr. Vessey observed that her eyes had a startled half-frightened look. There was rich promise of mystery here; he sniffed it unctuously.

"I c'n send them things up in the mornin'. I don't deliver ushelly—but I'd do it fer an accommodation."

"No. No, thank you," she said quickly. "I can easily take them—"

"It's a clumsy bundle," said Sol, but she had already started for the door. He made a final effort. "About your mail. I'll look after it careful—new mail's apt to git mixed. An' if you give me the name right—" Again the startled look.

"The name? Oh, no—there won't be any mail." She started to escape quickly but Mr. Vessey was before her. He opened the door with charming grace and a sweeping bow, yet in the degree of his smile there was just a shade of knowing sympathy—of familiar understanding, as it were. It was a delicately graded smile full of, to him, subtle significance.

Unfortunately she did not see it. Without a glance and with a mere murmured "Thank you," she hastened out.

"She's a stuck-up piece," commented Sol, but Mr. Vessey didn't answer.

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He stood at the door, paring a finger nail, the remnant of his unpleasant smile still on his face. "The hair's a complete give-away. Little fool," he commented silently.

When a proper interval had elapsed, he settled his hat on his head and followed slowly after her. He did not wish to overtake her in the village. But he kept her figure well in sight.

He had quite forgot his matrimonial perplexity of a little while ago. This new adventure promised zest of a different caliber; it was as well at times that Mr. Vessey was unmarried.

When the last village outpost had been passed he quickened his pace. The stranger's graceful blue-clad shape was not far distant now—near enough for her to catch the sound of his footsteps overtaking her, yet she did not turn, and this rather pleased Mr. Vessey. It left the situation in his hands, as he desired it should be.

Yet when he came abreast and faced her he did not utter the mocking over-polite greet-

ing he had intended. For one thing, he realized, nettled, that although she could not have failed to notice him in the store, her eyes were void of any recognition now, or of any smallest interest.

It was inconceivable that this was sincere, and though it retarded matters somewhat, and it bored Mr. Vessey to be retarded, he submitted silently and began to feel his way, not the less secure of an ultimate score.

"I saw you just ahead of me and I thought I might be able to assist you with your parcel," he said graciously, making as if to take the package.

She made no sign of relinquishing it.

"Thank you. It is not heavy," she said quietly.

"No?" he said. "Then perhaps you will at least allow me to share your walk home? I have an errand out past the Ford place."

She did not reply to this, and Mr. Vessey, with a slight smile, fell into step with her.

"You can not realize how pleased we all are—and no one more than I—to have the old

place opened again. When we heard of it yesterday—ah, you look startled—you do not know how rapidly country news travels—there was general rejoicing. It is always delightful to have a summer resident arrive—the er—novelty, the variety—new blood, you know, but when I tell them more about you—when I tell them that the tenant up at Ford's is not only a young but a very pretty woman,—” He did not finish but swung round, very close to her, with his subtle smile.

She looked at him, her cheeks warm, her eyes contemptuous.

“You look displeased,” he smiled. “I beg of you—there is nothing wrong in observing or admiring beauty. And yours, may I say, is a very unusual type for Sweethills. It is seldom—in fact I do not recall that, ever before, a lady of your profession has visited us.”

“My profession,” she exclaimed in spite of herself. Mr. Vessey looked arch.

“Oh,” he smiled, “I had an idea it was that way. I’ve surprised you. Yes, I know a

thing or two—and can put two and two together. It's to be an incognito, isn't it—and you're quite safe—from everybody else. But I've been around somewhat—I know the stage—a little—”

The contempt in her eyes changed suddenly to amusement. “You take me to be an actress?” she exclaimed, and for the first time her lips curved in a smile.

Mr. Vessey shook a finger at her coquettishly.

“Yes—and if I told it would make the deuce of a scandal. We're a straight-laced set here. But you're safe from me. Only,” his face wore the look of a cat at a cream pitcher, “only you mustn't play proud lady with me. I'm on to you and if you want me to sit tight and let you play your little game, you mustn't be too cold. I'll run up here evenings sometimes to cheer you up—and we can talk things over. It'll be good to talk to a pretty little girl like you.” They had reached her gate now and Mr. Vessey leaned suddenly close, his eyes burning down into hers. “You'll let me come

soon, won't you—you little beauty," he whispered.

The girl stood motionless a minute looking at him. Then, "Why—you're only a common masher," she said coldly. "I didn't know they had them in the country."

The contempt in her voice struck him full-force. A quick red flashed into his face.

"A masher," he cried hotly. "I—I'll teach you as to that—"

But she did not look at him. With swift fingers she unfastened the gate and hurried to her door.

Mr. Vessey was still speaking hotly when she closed and locked it on the inside. She leaned against the door a moment, a little breathless. "The beast," she said, and suddenly she laughed.

But it was not a pleasant laugh, nor did it last long. It changed suddenly to tears.

She sank on the lower steps of the stairway and sobbed wildly. "That's what it means to be *alone*"—she wept—"but I've chosen—and I must bear it."



## CHAPTER VI

### INTRODUCING A LOYAL RETAINER AND SOME MEDITATIONS

#### FROM THE JOURNAL:

I have been here two days. . . . Yet when I came I did not dream of staying. Perhaps it's fate—forcing my hand.

Yesterday morning I was wakened by a loud knocking. When I went to the front door a woman stood on the step—if one may call her that. I never knew that a woman could look like that.

She was the most grotesque creature I've ever seen. Tall, thin, absolutely curveless, with a face like an evaporated apple, under a terrible creation of black wool.

"I've come to clean fur ye—if no one ain't bespoke it?"

I couldn't understand her at first but I presently realized she had come to clean the house

for me. It amused me; like the man in the little shop, she thinks I've come to stay.

"Well," I said, "it's a nice old place and it certainly needs a cleaning."

"I have ten cents an hour," she announced.

She meant this was the princely stipend for an hour of her labor. I asked her in. I didn't know what else to do. She groaned when she saw the dust and cobwebs.

"I sh'd think ye'd 'a' had it cleaned afore ye came," she said suspiciously. "Hain't b'en redd up in years."

"I'm afraid I didn't expect to find it in this condition," I evaded. She seemed to burn to wade into the dust.

"But ye hain't got nothin' to do with. Ye got to have a broom an' a mop, an' pails an' soap an' a kittle for hot water—"

"Perhaps you will buy them in the village if I give you the money—" I suggested.

"That'd be a pity, when your own brooms an' kittles'll be comin' soon. How soon do ye expect your furnishings?" This was a new thought. I explained that I had none

coming. For—for a short stay perhaps I could buy some, though. I was wishing now I had dismissed her. But she grew enthusiastic. I could, she told me. It seems she has a cousin in the village who deals in second-hand goods. For very little I could get plain substantial things for the house—could buy or rent them.

It flashed on me while she was speaking.

*It is Fate.*

Why shouldn't I stay here—for a while at any rate. I can not go back—that much is certain; yet I do not know what to do with myself. I must think—I must wait until I know.

Why not here in this sweet, forgotten, old house, with the hills and river showing from its windows—and such a garden! It's full of things. I don't know the names but I can scarcely wait.

I am writing this now at my own table.

I bought it yesterday from Silas Hand for

"six shillin'." It's black walnut, old-fashioned and very solid.

Seraphy Bassett has cleaned the sitting-room and there's a cheerful wood fire in the grate. I found a blue china cup and put some snowdrops in it on the mantel.

Everything smells soapy and moist and clean.

Seraphy is stepping about the kitchen now, singing through her nose. She is washing out my single extra change of underwear. "Lord of light," she said when I gave my French chemise to her, "is that what you call a shimmy? It looks more like a bride's pocket handkerchief."

I must get some new clothes. I've written to the agent for a month's lease here. He lives in Boston and hasn't been here for years. The rent he has asked in the past is ridiculously low; I can easily manage it. My exchequer is not very heavy but it will stretch some distance if prices thus far are an indication.

I'm not using my full name—only the first two names. There is no need and I feel safer thus. I don't know why I say safer. Larry will probably not try to find me—he will not care to—and none of my friends—friends!—will ever wander near here. It gives me a cozy snug feeling, though, to hide myself under a partial alias. I am to be known as Rita Ashe.

I spoke to Seraphy about that hen this morning.

She laid another egg in time for breakfast yesterday, but at luncheon when I looked—I rather fancied an egg for luncheon—the nest was still empty.

I looked again at tea-time but there was nothing doing.

To-day has been the same; only one meager offering for breakfast—nothing the rest of the day. I asked Seraphy what was the matter a little while ago.

I never saw any one laugh so. It was quite painful to watch—like a man crying. Evi-

dently Seraphy doesn't laugh often. It seems one egg a day is quite usual for a hen. I know nothing about hens—nor anything else it seems.

Seraphy was pointing out the flower garden to-day. Everything grows here—

"And things good to eat," I suggested.

"Not jest here," she said, "back in the vegetable garden."

I would like to ask her about those greens I tasted the other day, but I dare not yet.

We have neighbors. They seem to spring out of the earth, for to my untrained eye nothing from my river outlook shows a sign of a house.

"Look for the chimneys, stupid," Seraphy said rudely.

She is really a terrible Turk to have around—so vicious, so hideous, so horribly clean and already so unwarrantably protective—

All through the morning neighborly offerings have been arriving via the back door.

I asked Seraphy to excuse me to the bearers and she has done it, but very unwillingly.

It isn't etiquette here.

The offerings are arranged in the pantry cupboard—pies, platters of cookies, several loaves of home-baked bread and a great bowl of baked beans. It looks delicious, but Seraphy scorns some of it. One pie I'm not to "dast" to touch.

The basket of little golden custards was sent from the big house at the end of the road. A girl brought them to the front door and I let her in myself.

She's the loveliest creature I've ever seen—all rose, and cream, and bronze. I asked her to sit down—and we talked a little.

I kept looking at her all the time—thinking what a sensation she'd make on Broadway in a smoke-colored velvet, say—with skunk furs—she has just the bloom and color for soft neutral tones no one else can wear.

Strange that I should be so candidly in love with another woman's looks. Only a little

while since and I would have belittled her even to myself.

I spoke about getting some new clothing. How does one go about it in a village? One gets a sewing-woman it seems. My beautiful visitor knew of an excellent one.

"I shall want some nightgowns," I said.

She became enthusiastic. The sewing-woman had made her lovely ones.

"But can she embroider;" I asked, "and where can one get good material?"

Brownlee's, she said, had splendid outing-flannel in either pink or blue stripes. And Martha's pattern was very pretty—not the usual Mother Hubbard—but more like a tea-gown.

I could not help laughing.

Outing-flannel, *striped*, and Mother Hubbard!

I had to explain to Cynthia—that's her name—and she blushed like a rose. People here always wore outing-flannel in the cold months, she said—and spring is cold here.



Nainsook and lace are too thin—even when they can afford them.

There was something in her gentle dignity that rebuked me. Who am I to have luxuries? I've never earned a cent. I've let Larry provide and pay for all my doll-caprices, clothes and other things.

But they belonged to that old life.

If I am to step out of it and stay here, why not the simple customs of the place? I got the sewing-woman's address. I will have out-ing-flannel—and Mother Hubbards and stripes—red and white ones if need be—like the candy sticks in the little shop. And the pretty Cynthia is to come again. She seemed a little reluctant, but I made her promise.

Perhaps she will be my friend. I've never had a friend.

Every one here seems good and simple. It's in the air, I think—and being close to growing things.

One person, though, doesn't belong. The

horrible creature with the nasty eyes who walked up with me day before yesterday.

He reminds me of Harry Nash . . . and that night four years ago.

I shouldn't have worn that scarlet crêpe from Poirot—not with my hair. It *was* cut too low—though I quarreled with Larry when he said so . . . I tried to misunderstand, but he did love me—then.

And Harry Nash put his hands on my shoulders after supper and called me a little “red devil” and tried to kiss me. . . . Of course he was drinking and Larry shouldn't have struck him down . . . but I *loved* Larry that night. I wonder what he would have done yesterday—perhaps he would not have cared though.

I don't think he's worrying about me.

No, we couldn't have gone on the way we were doing. It would have ended soon—he would have left me—at least it's I who deserted first.

I don't think we ever really knew each other—Larry and I.

We merely reached hands across a gulf. The real selves were hidden too deep under all the layers of foolishness.

Yes, there must be another self to Larry—something under that handsome usual surface.

He does look usual—in New York. Any one would know he belonged in Manhattan. His manner, his clothes, tell it—I think one could almost guess his occupation.

There's something about a successful broker that marks him. Perhaps it's a certain nervousness of eye—a certain restless, alert look.

I've always liked the type,—wide-awake, keen, definite. Not of course that Larry is hall-marked like some. He hasn't played the game long enough, nor made money enough, but there's an air of excitement about him that always stimulated me—

We've looked nice together. I've been usual, too, in an unusual way. People always notice me in restaurants and theaters, and I've always liked it—

I wonder how many would know me now.

These hill winds will kill my complexion. I think it's dead already—it hasn't known cold cream since I left; I can't tell, the only mirror I have is a mere scrap of one Seraphy unearthed in the garret.

In its wavering depths Seraphy and I might be sisters.

Somehow I care nothing for my looks now.

Larry will never believe me when I try to tell him.

What an insane thing to write; my hand controlled it, not my mind—"will never believe" indeed! He shall not have the chance. I've left the old life forever—and Larry belongs with it.

No, no, I shall never go back.

I am going to stay here a month at least; I've engaged Seraphy to stay with me.

## CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH A YOUNG GENTLEMAN PAYS A CALL, LOOKS  
DEEP INTO FEMININE EYES AND GOES AWAY WOUNDED

AT the end of the road Paul Richter saw what he had come seeking.

He was successful to-day; although for three consecutive days his zeal in strolling past the old Ford place had been unrewarded.

But to-day she was there! He was rather glad now that he had exchanged his careless corduroys for some smart new English walking togs he had taxed himself to buy lately. He looked like Phœbus Apollo fitted out by Bond Street.

The object of his search, raking clumsily behind the rusty hedge at the thick carpet of dead leaves across her flower-beds, saw him coming but pretended she didn't. "Another man," she whispered to herself, "a pretty man this time."

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She raked very busily, her golden head in another direction, waiting for him to pass. "Why doesn't he?" she wondered with an impatient clutch of the steel teeth into the mold.

She was answered almost immediately in a pleasant barytone.

"If you're not careful you'll destroy those daffodils." She wheeled swiftly, the sun on her radiant locks, a faint color glowing in her face.

"Oh, that's why you haven't gone on? You've been watching the daffodils?" There was a faint tinge of irony. Paul smiled.

"Yes," he said, "I've been watching—the daffodils. I'm a bit of a horticulturist. I'm also your neighbor. If I had the spunk of a mouse I'd open your gate and come to call on you."

"Why don't you?" she asked, amused.

He shrugged.

"To tell you the truth I was going to, if I hadn't seen you. Now, I've got stage-fright. I'm like the rest of the neighborhood, dazzled to death."

She frowned slightly.

"I don't think I like it—being so interesting for the neighborhood. I—I want to be quiet."

Paul laughed, amused.

"You couldn't be anything else if you tried here—and you mustn't mind us. It's just our insinuating little way—"

"Oh, I don't really object. Everybody's been so kind and simple—so good, you know. I've only seen one who wasn't—"

"Who was that?"

"I don't know his name; he wears coat tails. It was a novelty. I didn't know anybody wore them in the morning."

"You mean Porter Vessey—he's our celebrity. So you've seen him—and he's seen you." His face darkened. "He's a shining light around here—the kind that won't wear a bushel. If he should be annoying—he can be—"

"He won't be annoying," she answered, resuming her raking. "I shan't have time for—men."

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There was a moment's silence, then Paul said quite gravely: "I hope you do not really mean that."

"Don't," she said sharply, "don't begin please—"

"Begin what?" cried Paul, startled.

"Oh—the usual sort of thing. I'm so tired of it."

"I beg your pardon," said Paul stiffly, "I don't understand."

She looked at him a moment, then laughed a clear sweet laugh.

"Forgive me—of course you don't. You belong to Sweethills, too. I forgot for a moment. Come in—won't you please?"

He came in rather coldly. His dignity was sadly ruffled. She couldn't know—and yet she ought to have known! One had only to look at her to realize she had lived in wider fields. Why then did she not recognize at once the hall-mark of the man of the world?

Could it be possible she was teasing him?

"The yokel obeys," he said, wounded yet jocular, as he fastened the gate behind him—



"the village hind, freed from the labors of the field, hastens to enter the lady's bower."

She shot him a sweet surprised glance from eyes thick-lashed, gray and expressive, that tingled through him from head to foot.

"I've not offended you?" she cried. "And I meant to be merely complimentary. You see I've fallen in love with Sweethills—the peace of it, everything. I'm going to be of it, myself—"

"It will deserve its name then," he said in a low voice, looking deep into her eyes.

She neither colored nor looked away confused. Indeed she bore his glance very well, and Paul decided her eyes were rather more sophisticated, slightly older, than he had first thought.

"Very pretty," she smiled. "But you must forget you're a man now—you're something so much nicer when you come into my garden—you're my neighbor. I've never known what the word meant until now. Shall we sit on the porch in the sun? I'll get Seraphy Bassett to bring out two chairs."

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"Seraphy Bassett—have you got her with you? She'll make you a good old watchdog."

"I should cal'late she will," said a dry voice from the front door. "She can watch out fer you, Paul Richter, with your gallivantin' round. She's not a-takin' any slack or names neither from a person she carried round when he had the colic and before his teeth was cut."

"Oh, dry up, Seraphy," said Paul tolerantly.

"Two chairs, please—Seraphy," said the girl, "here on the porch."

"Not outside," cried Seraphy, "be you a-goin' to set here like fool lunatics with the hull outdoors blowin' on to you?"

"Be quick, please," said the other quietly.

There was a moment's silent encounter between two pairs of eyes—between two wills, then with a grumbled word Seraphy produced the chairs.

"Nifty work," said Paul under his breath. "You're a conjurer. I enjoy seeing Seraphy sat on."

"Oh, Seraphy sits on me whenever she pleases," said his hostess. "Like all guardians and chaperons she must be kept properly in the background. Now what shall we talk about—the river? It's gorgeous looking down the river from here, isn't it?"

"You're not beginning correctly," he said. "We never discuss anything so impersonal and ungossipy as scenery when we go a-visiting in Sweethills. We ought to have a bit of scandal to dissect."

She made a sudden restless movement.

"But there is no scandal—there couldn't be here—"

"Pardon me—but there is. May I?" He reached for his cigarette case. "And I'm not certain that it doesn't center about this very place—don't look so startled. It's only the outrageous performance of a certain young lady—a militant suffragette, name of Christabel—a hen to be exact, who insists on gadding away from her proper home."

"Oh, a hen," she said with a sudden mirth-

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ful quaver in her voice. "A hen," she repeated more firmly, and she looked down the valley with a fine pretense of indifference.

"Yes," said Paul, "and I've a notion that she is stopping here! That my new neighbor is boarding with her!"

"Boarding with us, you mean," she cried. "Why, Seraphy feeds her. I never saw anything so small eat such immense quantities."

"So she is here," he laughed, "the little beggar! I'll make you a present of her, if you wish. She hates me. Flies at me when she sees me. Suspect she's strong for women's rights—that's why I call her a suffragette. I've tried everything. Painted her coop yellow too—nothing doing. She'll be much happier in feminine society."

"I've never known a suffragette," she laughed, "but they look quite nice—those I've seen on Fifth Avenue."

He caught her up quickly.

"Fifth Avenue! You know New York—I thought so!"

She bit her lip.

"I—that is—I've been there—n-not very well."

"I adore New York," he said impressively.

She did not answer and he took a meditative pull at the cigarette.

"Little old New York," he murmured after a space. Into his voice he threw just the proper, reverent, regretful tone the average exiled New Yorker uses in speaking of his deity. It was rather well done, but sorely wasted.

"I—I—Sweethills is so lovely," the young woman said hastily; "such wonderful growth—I can scarcely wait to see the garden bloom."

Paul laid aside his favorite subject regretfully.

"The garden is pretty—chock-full of flowers and romance—what you were doing when I came, for instance—I can't imagine a more graceful occupation."

"And what was I doing?" She smiled. "It seemed to me I was merely getting myself very grubby."

"You were polishing Ann Ford's wedding ring—"

"Ann Ford's what?"

"It's only one of the romantic touches on the place. It's made of daffodils. Rather wonderful when it blooms, a good six feet in diameter, and a foot thick—solid yellow bloom. Just wait—it'll catch your breath away."

"But why—why do you call it a wedding ring?" she asked a little breathlessly.

"That's what she called it. Poor old Ann Ford! Of course she wasn't old when she planted it—she was one of my grandmother's schoolmates. When she was twenty she became engaged to a young sea-captain—used to go out on a packet from Boston. The wedding-day was all set and Ann busy getting her clothes ready. She was to have been married in May and in the fall she planted her 'wedding ring' out here. Unlucky, probably. It never came off. A March gale caught the packet-boat and everybody was lost—but the 'wedding ring' bloomed all right."

"Oh—horrible," she cried.

"Yes," he hesitated slightly, "the more because—they're very decided about these things in a village—they—as a matter of fact they weren't kind to her afterward—food for the scandal-mongers and all that—"

She frowned.

"I don't like your story. And I don't like having a symbol of tragedy in my garden. Why didn't she tear it up?"

"Perhaps it comforted her. Women are like that sometimes. She lived to be very old. Never went out—nor had any one to see her. But the ring bloomed every year and had careful tendance."

"That was beautiful of her," she said quickly. "I think I'll like to keep the ring bright for the poor thing, this year. The whole story is rather wonderful. Are there many like it here?"

"Old stuff," he said lightly, "conventional. There isn't a thing that hasn't happened before—anywhere. I'm speaking, of course, from a writer's standpoint. One positively

must tap a new vein nowadays—the conventional situation palls. It's difficult—for people have a rather awkward way of doing things conventionally—”

“But you—Seraphy has told me all about you, Mr. Richter—surely these hills, and the river—”

“Not any more,” he interrupted; “the time's past when people want to sit down and read about the mist coming out of the river—or rain against a mountain. One must do life—things like Masefield.” He shifted restlessly. “I'm going to do a play—I've not worked it up yet—something elemental, broad of grasp, human—that's the thing.” He lighted another cigarette. “Human,” he repeated, “and I stick here among the hills, trying to work it out. Sometimes I think I'm quite insane to try it. I ought to shut up my box and go where there's real inspiration. I can get it in the city—where the noise of the night comes in; where *people* are; big things. It always gets me. New York, now—”



She appeared not to have heard. She got up with a sudden impulsive movement.

"I believe Seraphy was right," she said. "It is chilly out here. The sun's getting quite low."

He took her hand in dismissal—the softest smallest morsel of a hand. It took all his self-control to refrain from crushing it.

"You're going to let me come again? I—I'd like to read you the draft of the play," he added quickly under her eyes.

"Your—Mr. Vessey. He asked that, too."

"But I'm not Vessey," he said in a hurt voice.

She smiled enigmatically.

"But you are you," she said.

He thrilled.

"I have never wanted anything so much," he said in a low voice.

"But I know so little about plays," she laughed; "you mustn't overvalue my opinion."

"Oh—" he bit off an expletive, "you know what I mean," he said boyishly.

"You mustn't mean things," she said.  
"You're my neighbor, remember."

"Depend on it I'll go the limit on that," he threatened.

He took her hand again to seal the compact. And if he held it an infinitesimal fragment of time longer than he should it was because it was physically impossible for him to let go before.

She did not seem to object. A faint smile curved her lips, her long lashes rested on her cheeks.

When he looked back at the foot of the hill she was still smiling—or at least he fancied so.

## CHAPTER VIII

WHEREIN THE POPULATION OF NEW YORK IS DECREASED,  
AND MR. RICHTER IS STIRRED BY DIVERSE EMOTIONS

THE birds were flocking north now. Every day for a week the faint far calling of wild geese had floated out of the spring skies—and one could see them weaving like a delicate pattern of dark threads against it, or boldly flashing to earth for a rest and luncheon. Bold, haughty-looking blackbirds in great hundreds, robins, fat, sociable, loquacious; ground-birds, catbirds, bluebirds.

Later, in May, when the buds had fulfilled their promise, there would be those lovelier jeweled visitors—golden orioles, sapphire-winged indigo-birds—red-winged blackbirds, wild canaries. Paul Richter, deep in a big chair in his bay-window watched idly the first burgeoning leaf bloom, and the chattering advance of the bird-army.

It was a pleasant window to sit in—in a pleasant room. A curve of small-paned French windows half-screened with muslin and dark flowered chintz, which modulated the light pleasantly in the low-ceiled mellow room that, like its owner, gave a curious mixed impression of both masculine and feminine force!

There was a fireplace, chiefly, low and broad with a superb bearskin and a couple of worn, wholly masculine leather chairs before it; but there was also a great deal of chintz about the room, bits of old mahogany, gleams from odd pieces of china on the wall, a baby grand piano, house plants. Close by the fire stood an aged lectern of dark oak, a manuscript on it and tossed across one corner a soutane of pale gray wool.

Paul wore the soutane when he wrote; and he wrote at the lectern, where his eyes could seek inspiration in the crackle of pine-boughs under the mantel.

There were books about the room, but three occupied a peculiar and proud isolation. They stood alone on the mantel—three slender vol-

umes bound in pale gray vellum. Before them a white paper-narcissus lifted a long delicate stalk of ghostly bloom from a beaten silver pot.

The books were Paul's volumes of verse. The flower might have been a spiral of pale consecrated smoke.

Above these hung a girl's portrait—temporarily *the* girl. Neither the books nor the blossom had changed their position in many months—but the girl's face had altered four times. Three predecessors, face down, lay in a near-by cabinet drawer. To make room for them it had been necessary to remove several earlier fancies.

It was a room that eminently "set off" its occupant, lounging carelessly in his velvet house-jacket now.

He looked as he would have desired—like a young man who could rise out of his chair and at a minute's notice touch you off a nocturne—exquisitely too—scribble you an impromptu sonnet—quote you Herrick or Suckling—give you a deft critique on modern

painting, or the minor Latin poets, discuss the minutiae of gardening and pruning; or the latest sartorial fancy from Fifth Avenue.

In a word, a versatile chaser of many arts—a delightfully charming and none too thorough dilettante. Apart from this, a healthy, good-looking young chap whom two dogs, a fair number of friends and one divinely sweet and tender young woman loved most faithfully.

Perhaps it was this that stamped his countenance with peculiar satisfaction now. Now and then, as he mused, his eyes roved almost lovingly over the colors and contours of the room. But they returned always to the hill and sky pageant the great window revealed—and the birds, playing, flirting, tilting at one another across his stretch of garden.

A little later his apple trees would be musical with feathered occupants—for there was a deal of delightful housekeeping went on in May and June behind the new green screen—which eventuated most pleasantly in top-heavy, solemn-eyed, spindle-legged little bunches of feathers who were bullied and ca-

joined into wing-calisthenics by nervous and adoring little mothers. It was all charming to watch—like the apple trees themselves.

Paul was rather proud of his apple trees.

It always pleased him in the wine-flavored autumns to put on a broad-brimmed hat and a brown denim smock (copied carefully from an Abbey drawing) and gather the apples himself. There was something about it that appealed. It put him "into the picture," which was always pleasing.

He would have liked very much to have persuaded Sime Hathaway, his venerable helper, into a smock also—the young master of the house, democratic, gracious, etc., gathering his orchard fruits, with the hale, old and properly respectful retainer assisting.

Unfortunately Sime had no artistic sense. He balked at a smock; he wasn't a-going to make a Chinee of himself and wear his shirt outside his pants. Also, though he was very fond of Paul in a tolerant fashion, he would have died before he would have been guilty of respectful demeanor.

He was a marplot, this Sime, contriving in a dozen ways to foil the artistic genius of his employer. He was an impeccable cook and general male house-worker; a handy-man and gardener of skill; an excellent blacker of boots and brusher of clothing; an atheist, a Democrat, one of God's gentlemen—to quote himself—and quite indispensable to Richter in a dozen ways, yet he disdained in any one of these rôles to be other than his ordinary tobacco-chewing self.

It was no silken-voiced gentleman's gentleman who came of a morning to bear his master fresh linen and hot water, to put up the shade and say with a respectful cough, "A very fine day, sir"—but a shuffle-footed, crow-voiced old tyrant who pounded on Richter's door and bawled the hour at him through his teeth. He never touched his forelock; nor scraped his boots tidily.

He strode into the room now as unfeelingly as though he were entering a stable and not a shrine to a personality, and thrust a telegram at Paul.



It bore a simple message:

“Watch out. Chasing this. Heiney.”

“Heiney,” said the poet, pulling out his watch, “what’s eating him? You’d better tidy up the blue chamber, Sime. I’ve a friend coming to stay right away.”

“Man or woman?” asked the venerable.

“Man, of course—you old varmint.”

“Well, you didn’t say. Pity to go makin’ a muss in that blue room. It hain’t dirty none.—I jest cleaned it out three weeks ago. Put in towel and water an’ ever’thing—”

“Well, you look it over,” said Paul vaguely.

He left the details of his housekeeping to Sime. He turned his back on the retainer and sat before his piano. If Heiney was Heiney—and of course he was—he was going to be here when the afternoon train came in. Heiney was nothing if not decisive.

Paul played a bit of Balikirew and a little thing from Chaminade. When he had finished Chaminade’s “little thing” he heard the

whistle of a distant train in the Sweethills station. "Twenty minutes," he said cryptically.

But it was thirty minutes before he heard the rumble of wheels at his gate. Came feet on his veranda, a strenuous pounding on his door and a vision of Sime ushering in—or was it struggling with, a young, rather ugly, very red-headed man in a large ulster and gray cap.

He seemed to slough Sime off, wring Paul's hand, remove cap and ulster, and dispose of a couple of bags simultaneously.

" 'Welcome home,' " he said, beaming into Paul's face. "Spring has come at last. The first red tulip has arrived. What a bully little hole you've got."

"I expected you five minutes ago."

"We made good time. I came in the 'fly'—or the worm, whichever you like—half a mile in twenty-eight minutes—and you are critical. *My dear sir!*"

"And how do you like the country?" asked Paul in his best reportorial tone, as his guest

made for the fire, rubbing his hands before Sime's newly lighted blaze.

"I won't do a thing to it," retorted the guest amiably.

"How many years since you've been outside Broadway, anyhow, Heiney? It'll seem darker there without you." He looked significantly at his guest's vivid head. "I've wanted to pull you up here for so long. Of course it's none of my business—but I would like to know why I'm honored now—and so suddenly."

"There's an old geezer up in Madison Avenue—an M. D. in fact—who might drop you a hint," said Heiney impersonally.

Paul took a swift step toward him.

"You don't mean? Heiney,—nothing serious—"

"These your cigarettes?" Heiney poked with a pretense of unconcern at the tobacco kit on Paul's table. "Oh—about the geezer. Why—you see"—he looked out through the French windows at the open country—"you see—I—my dear Paul—I'm going to get it in

the neck, or perhaps 'have got' would be more correct—my throat." He looked over at Paul for one fleeting second, his face sobered—"Where the chicken got the ax," he added with a villainous effort at light humor.

"Heiney. You! You poor old scout!"

"No flowers yet," said Heiney, in command of himself again; "it's not altogether hopeless, old man. Only a maybe. I got my walking papers yesterday—could have knocked me down with a feather, to coin a new phrase. Had a beastly cold all winter, didn't think it anything else—old geezer poked me in the ribs—sounded my windharp, told me to make my getaway—*quick*. I'd have killed him for a nickel. Perhaps I oughtn't have come here. But you're a tough old nut and you can fumigate when I'm gone—can't you? I didn't know of another earthly place to crawl to. And if you'll put me up a night or two, kind loidy, until I get my bearings—"

"Put you up, you damned old fool!" said Paul roughly, his throat full of emotion. "You'll live here if you've got to live in the

country. Haven't I been at you these last five years to hole up here in the summer, with me. I'll make a new man of you. Hill sunshine and winds and milk and eggs—"

"And no cigarettes—this is my last"—he shook his head ruefully—"and no little old New York—honestly, Paul, I daren't think. It's bred in my marrow—I *am* New York—'where the cars go by the door.' If the geezer's right—and he's one of the most expensive—the chances are against my ever going back—I can live—if you'll call it that—in some tucked-away fold in the hills. By God," he cried bitterly, his face distorted suddenly, "I'd rather die—I don't know why I came—"

"You'll like it after a while," said Paul; "it gets you. Wait till you see my birds—and my garden."

"Oh, birds—give me the kind Martin serves up on the 'Fifth Avenue side'—red room, you know—and cabbages! Mrs. Wiggs!—I'd rather meet a romaine salad—"

"You sound hopeless," said Paul; "still we

do have things." Heiney wheeled round and faced him swiftly.

"You do," he corroborated; "skirts."

"Skirts?"

"Girls—a girl, to be exact."

"Oh!" There was a pause—slight yet significant while each man pulled at his cigarette. Richter blew out three perfect rings of smoke before he asked: "What sort of a girl?"

"A beauty," said Heiney gravely. "No pinchbeck—the real thing. Who is she, Paul—there's only one of course."

"None of your business," cried Richter sharply; "you look after your medicine, man. You're an invalid up here—you won't have time for your usual game."

"What's it to you? You wouldn't care a sou! Not with this dame hanging here. I don't think I know her."

He squinted up at the portrait above the mantel.

"Oh—that," cried Richter.

He took two steps to the mantel and jerked

the picture down carelessly. Without a glance he tossed it into the fire.

"Ever the same impulsive child," mused Heiney. "So you do know her—"

"You behave," said Paul, shaking his head at him. "You'll never get within speaking distance of her through me, you irresistible homely red-headed siren—"

"You won't be necessary," mocked Heiney. "In the country one can do things *à la pastorale*. I'll catch her out milking a cow some day and get her to take an interest in my health. She's a peach—a pippin—a winner—"

Neither young man spoke for a minute or two. When they did it was to break into a new and irrelevant conversational field. They were friends of long standing, had been at college together, and they had many things to talk over. They were a peculiar contrast. Paul was infinitely the better looking—handsome, well-modeled; Heiney was none of these things.

He was insignificant of figure and feature,

unmarked save perhaps by his brilliant hair and present too pale complexion. His clothing, while more costly than Paul's, showed nothing special in style or finish.

Yet for all this Heiney Van Vorden was attractive. There was a subtle though careless manner in the wearing of those undistinguished clothes, which Paul had not yet been able to achieve; and there was infinite charm in his crooked whimsical smile and animated eyes. Paul knew he had won his full quota of feminine scalps.

Now while he led Heiney's thought far afield from the subject of attractive "skirts," he could not conceal a faint, latent, half-jealous wish that he had not come.

It was impossible, of course, to fear any one of Heiney's physical limitations and yet—there was going to be constraint between them, Paul felt. And he rather hoped that Heiney wouldn't stay—even while he now played the host charmingly to his old schoolfellow.



## CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH THE SPRING LADY RECEIVES HER CHRISTENING,  
AND SERAPHY BASSETT, ASSISTED BY SOLOMON,  
MAKES A DECIDED IMPRESSION

FROM THE JOURNAL:

It has begun.

Something told me it would. Long before Seraphy had finished removing the first layer of dust from my threshold, I knew a man was going to loom up. And he has loomed.

He came yesterday—I don't count the creature who was nasty. This is *the* man—it is very evident he intends to be. He's big and young and handsome and blue-eyed, and a little conceited and certain of himself. Larry would call him "a bit soft." One feels that—though he's superbly built and can use his muscles like a man, no doubt.

I like him—but what am I going to do with him? I can't let him come here. And I won't play with him—it might be entertain-

ing, but no one knows how a thing like that would come out—here.

No, I shall see very little of him. He shall not read me his plays, nor his books, nor the language of the clouds, nor anything else.

Sometimes, no doubt, I'll be so lonely for a man I'll fairly pine. It isn't easy to uproot a lifelong habit. But I'll succeed. My garden will have to do instead—now that I've blotted Larry out of my existence.

I don't believe I was stern enough yesterday. It's so easy to be foolish—eye and lip-foolish.

So habitual with me. I'll have to wear a face like a plaster cast. I'm afraid he thinks he's going to fall in love—I'll have to help him fall out quickly. It will not suit my mood at all. I think I'll copy Seraphy's wiles.

I'm glad he didn't offer me his cigarettes.

He thinks he's very sophisticated, but he overlooked that. I'm glad, though . . . Seraphy would have swooned.

But I was hideously nervous all the time.

I've never been really fond of tobacco, but of course I've always smoked—a great deal, too much.

Yesterday I only realized what a hold it gets on one. I kept thinking of Amy Marshall's humidor packed full of little Yousoufs.

Perfect nonsense. I've never given them a thought before.

I stayed out in the garden a long time afterward to "blow the smoke from my brain."

I potted in and out among the mold and dead leaves. It looks like plain muck but if you poke close you see wonderful things. It's queer how a few days ago I saw nothing—then, when Seraphy had told me how to see, I could pick out the "quick" from the "dead" as she put it.

Now I am really clever. I can find all the little new ferns, rolled up in tight coils. I know a peony shoot, "stars of Bethlehem," the spikes of crocus, and yesterday under the apple tree I saw a great patch of violets coming into leaf.

While I was grubbing around, a red-headed woodpecker tapped up and down on the trees. I could fairly thrill to watch him. Such a brave little black and white soul, with his little red cardinal's hat.

I've made another wonderful find. A squirrel lives under the edge of our roof—in the little attic place you have to use a ladder to get into.

I watched him flying—does a squirrel fly?—in and out of the trees ever so long.

Then I saw him go in under the roof. Think of it! A squirrel right over one's head. Of course, though, I ought to be familiar with the sensation, after wearing that squirrel toque I used to have.

Seraphy says she has seen him here other summers. She says sometimes there's a Mrs. Squirrel, too.

It would be lovely if I should have a whole squirrel family right under my roof-tree.

When I watch the bright-eyed, silky little thing, I don't like to think about that toque

—nor my jacket and muff. They must have taken a great many squirrel families!

I stayed out until everything was gray with dusk and the valleys full of purple mist.

My feet were cold—my cheeks like snow.

Seraphy came and felt them—not impertinently at all—just like one's grandmother might, I think, in a grave, elderly, reproving sort of way.

She had a dignified scolding ready for me too—also, a great pot of hot tea and a fresh wood fire.

The chill spring air gets into one's veins. It *is* good to be out; but it's best to be out and to come in—in to a fire like this, all rose and gold and blue, lovelier than any of Tiffany's treasure chests.

I think I laid the tobacco bogy. If it ever rises to haunt me again I'll buy one of those Red Rose stogies I saw down at Sol Brown-lee's. With that lying in wait to refresh me when my flesh fails, I shall surely be strong.

Yesterday I gathered my first arbutus.

The pretty Cynthia took me. She is the sweetest person I have ever known. She almost takes my breath away with her views of life.

She knows positively nothing about it!

She makes me think of a sheet of fair white paper. There isn't the tiniest finger-mark on her. I must be careful not to smudge her. I watch myself rigidly. Every one I know has got something of soil, or taint, or tarnish from life—if it's ever so little—but Cynthia is as free and fresh as the sweet April breeze that blew to-day, or the cold sweet mountain spring we drank from.

I'm not fit to know her. And yet I crave her. If she'll be my friend—let me learn from her! When I'm with her something drops away from me—a feeling of burden, of uncleanness that I've brought with me from my other life.

She took me high into the hills. I had to stop and rest very often. It seems I have no wind. But the day was heavenly, and neither

of us minded, for every time we stopped a few notches higher up, the country spread out wider and wider. Long marching ranks of hills, the farthest a pale blue, and in and out like a narrow silver ribbon, the little river.

Sweethills lay almost at our feet. I could see the three church spires—the smoke from the afternoon train, the giant maples that line its streets.

At last we came to an old stone-quarry, and clambering above this, to a curving sunny slope—a dimple on the mountain's face. All around, it was guarded by tall hemlocks and beeches, and lovely graceful birches (I am indebted to Cynthia for their names). I have never really *seen* trees before.

The place had been burned over once upon a time and now the growth was low—tiny cousins to the big guardian trees, hemlocks and pines and little birches.

But the turf was thick—a tangled springy mass of dead leaves and moss and crowfoot and long runners of tiny scarlet wintergreen berries (these from Cynthia, too).

It felt sweeter to the foot than any thick-piled carpet I've ever touched. At first I could only gasp at the river view, but presently I was ready to go on.

"But there's no need to go on," Cynthia laughed. "We're *here*."

"But I don't see any arbutus," I said. Arbutus is one thing I can recognize, having seen it bloom on city street corners.

"There's some at your feet," Cynthia said.

I looked down, but saw nothing.

She took a bit of dead stick and scraped in a little tuft of dark leaves.

It was true! Up came a lovely little tuft of rose-pink flowers—and sweet! It smells like heaven. It's so different, the smell here in the woods, from the pale faded odor of the flowers I've known. It's a true woods flower—it should never be taken to the city.

After that I was wild with excitement.

The ground was literally ablaze with it—there must have been a mile of it! I looted like a vandal.



I got down on hands and knees and picked until my fingers ached.

Cynthia gathered, too, but more sedately. She has come here every year since she was born, almost.

"It's your very own flower," I said; "it is you."

"Some one else told me that once." She blushed.

"Then he told the truth," I said. "I think I can almost guess who it was. It sounds like Mr. Richter."

She gave me a funny, little half-frightened look.

"But he didn't mean it," she said quietly; "it was only his way of speaking."

"No," I disagreed, "he probably meant it but it meant nothing to him."

She spoke almost defensively.

"Mr. Richter is a poet."

"Let's hope so," I said quite rudely.

"You don't like him?" she asked. There was something odd—challenging, yet hopeful in her face.

"Why shouldn't I?" I laughed. "He's a perfectly good young man—and a stunningly handsome one, too."

It was a flippant thing to say—indeed I was hardly attending to what I was saying, but her face surprised me. I wonder—can pretty Cynthia be in love? And with this pretty poet?

And why isn't he in love with her? If I were a man I should be mad about her—

Never mind, Cynthia, I'll be your love, instead.

I went to see the little dressmaker, Martha Bruce, to-day.

She lives at the very end of Sweethills in a tiny green cottage. When I knocked at the door a blue-eyed baby boy opened it for me. He was the cunningest thing—lovelier than any of the park babies I remember—and so dignified and sweet.

He couldn't have been more than three, but he put out his hand like a little man, when he opened the door. His little mother was

sewing in a room off the hall, and she came toward me, her tape over her shoulders and bits of thread clinging to her dress.

Such a slip of a creature, shy, faded-pretty, low-voiced. So different from the Fifth Avenue "Madames" I've known.

I told her my wants and we came to terms directly. She's to come up and sew three days next week—and bring her baby.

He stood at my chair solemn as a tiny owl, in his little blue rompers, while we talked.

"Aren't you going to tell me your name?" I asked, beginning with the usual original question.

"Dot no name," he said gravely.

"Why, yes, dear—your name's Robbie," his mother said quickly.

"Dot no name," he repeated firmly, then he added: "I'se a lub-baby."

"You surely are," I laughed, "a sweet lovely baby."

"A lub-baby," he repeated firmly. "Ain't dot no pop. Boys call it."

I couldn't grasp it for a little.

"What does he mean?" I asked.

His mother's anguished face should have told me.

She answered in a low trembling voice, "The boys aren't kind to him. They tease him and call him names—I—I don't know what to do—but it isn't his fault," she cried passionately.

"How dare they?" I cried. "Why should they—a dear cunning thing like that—"

"Oh, I guess you don't understand," she said brokenly, "you didn't get my name right, maybe. I'm *Miss Martha Bruce*."

She looked like a woman crucified.

I caught my breath quickly.

"Well, then, *Miss Martha Bruce*," I said, "you have a dear lovely little boy to be proud of."

Why shouldn't she be proud of him? She's a mother like any other.

But she caught my hand in both of hers.

"And you want me to come?" she whispered; "some folks don't when they *know*...."

"You'll break my heart if you don't come," I said, "and bring your sweet baby along. Will you come, love-baby?" I asked.

The little thing nodded his head.

"Kiss the kind lady, dearest," his mother whispered.

He put his little arms around my neck and pressed his soft little mouth against my cheek. I don't remember that a child has ever kissed me before. I wanted to keep him in my arms—to take him with me. Something—something hungry in my heart was fed when he kissed me.

My eyes were wet with tears when I left—and yet I'm not the crying kind.

"Say by-by, darling," the poor little mother said when I left. "Wave to the 'Spring Lady.' We call you that round here, miss," she explained apologetically, "because you've come in the spring instead of summer like most visitors do."

The Spring Lady! It's a pretty name. And I'm much obliged to Sweethills, and yet—I'm afraid Sweethills can be cruel when it

likes. This poor sewing-girl and her tragedy. . . .

I wonder—it's a crooked old world. How *can* a thing be a tragedy that ends in a lovely little child like that?—no matter what goes before.

If he were mine I shouldn't mind anything.  
I wish I had had a child.

If I believed in ghosts I should feel I'd met one this afternoon—in broad day, too.

I was coming up the hill road when I met the village stage.

It's a funny old caravan loaded with mailbags and odds and ends of luggage. I've never paid any special attention to it.

But to-day—of course it couldn't have been any one I know—it's utter nonsense to think it—

I'm tired to-night.

Seraphy helped me braid my hair. She admires it immensely. She calls it the golden stairs.

She's a kind old thing—her hands are as gentle as a mother's—

I wish I could remember my mother—

She called my attention to two offerings on my old dresser.

She had made three paper carnations "to brighten things up" and stuck them under my glass. One is a greenish lemon shade, one scarlet, the third, a purplish cerise—she calls it "solferino."

They certainly "brighten." She was quite proud of them. The other offering was a loan. It has distressed her because, as she puts it, I "do not read my Bible."

If Seraphy only knew how many Bibles have been "mine."

To-night her little old one lay on the dresser. We did not discuss it, but after she left I examined it.

It has a worn, brown, woodeny cover with a white china knob near each corner.

On the inside leaf is written in faded brown writing:

“To Serapha Evangeline Bassett, on the day of her confirmation. From her pastor, Thomas Wesley Hicks. 1859.”

There is a picture next the cover, of Samson and the lion. Samson has enormous quantities of accordion-plaited hair, and there is a cloud of steam rushing out of the lion's mouth.

There are other pictures—in the same style.

But who am I to laugh at Seraphy's Book of books? The very pages, worn with use, are eloquent of the comfort she has got from it.

I opened it to see if I could find any. It had none for me.

This is what I read:

*“Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.*

*“The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.*

*“She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.*



*"She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.*

*"She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar.*

*"She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens.*

*"She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard.*

*"She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms.*

*"She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night.*

*"She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff.*

*"She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.*

. . . . .

*"Strength and honor are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come.*

*"She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.*

. . . . .

*"Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her."*

## A DECIDED IMPRESSION 117

Her children! Her husband!

Oh, Solomon, Solomon, have you no word for me? In the light of your lantern I am nothing, nothing. Oh, my poor empty life!

## CHAPTER X

REGARDING A SOCIAL FUNCTION AND THE COMPLICATED  
PROCESSES BY WHICH IT IS ACHIEVED; AND A HOPE  
AND A WISH EXPRESSED BY MR. VAN VORDEN

ON a certain night in April, annually, there appeared in the second-story regions of Sweet-hills a generous and unwonted illumination, like a low-flung, new-born constellation, or a transported Broadway advertisement.

It was occasioned by the lamps of Sweet-hills, burning at what was normally a fashionable retiring hour, but what on this night was a period devoted to feminine—and in some cases masculine—beautifying preliminary to the single, purely social function the village knew. This was the annual Ladies' Evening and Banquet of the Sweethills Fancy Work Society.

The society was an organization that embraced all petticoat Sweethills—or practically

all. No one "calling herself a lady" was debarred, and since the tests for this profession were slight, and the privileges of the club attractive, the membership was comprehensive, including—as a contrast in needle skill and atmosphere—the Baptist minister's wife, who was known to have embroidered thirty-two guest towels in twenty weeks, and Mrs. Floy Harmon, who wore the lowest décolleté gowns in the village—a good two inches below the collar-bone—and who season by season worked on the same soiled piece, which, like Rawdon Crawley's shirt, had long since been outgrown by the times.

On the proper evening of April this year, the lights betokened the usual activity. Behind the sacred seclusion of slatted blinds and Nottingham curtains, ladies were engaged in "tucking-in the necks" of winter underwear that threatened to mar the airy charm of last summer's collarless lingerie gowns, or were unrolling tight smoking spirals of hair from Sunday curling-irons; in applying unwonted talcum powder, or scent—or presenting broad

recalcitrant backs to patient husbands (this thing exists even in the country) that last spring's or the spring before's foulard might be fastened up.

It was a process that took time—dressing for such a function.

Supper was always early on such an evening.

In one case only had the feminine toilet been hastened. This was Cynthia Field's, who had hurried dressing that she might help Mrs. Stanford into her new black satin.

She came in looking like a white rose—in a dress she had made for herself, of snowy muslin and a touch of white silk ribbon. Her recent haste had brought an added flurry of color to her cheeks, had loosened soft strands of her bronze hair across her forehead.

Her employer looked at her critically.

"It's a nice dress," she said measuredly, "but your hair ought to be tidier. I don't see why young girls to-day don't use bandoline or quince-seed oil. Glossy hair is so much prettier."

"You have such lovely hair," said Cynthia gently. "It looks beautiful to-night."

This was the truth. Above her colorless parchment face, the older woman's crown of silver gray braids made the single touch of distinction she possessed.

"It hasn't gone off much. I always had nice hair. I wonder—ought I to put in the jet wheat or that bit of black tulle?"

Cynthia gave her opinion. In a minute she was involved in a thousand intricacies of hooking up the elaborate creation of satin and fringe and chiffon and beads that lent decoration and concealment to Mrs. Stanford's sparse lines.

"Martha has done very well," she said with a touch of patronage. "Sometimes I think I'm foolish to go there—under the circumstances. But of course she is cheap—and she'd hardly dare raise her price. I suppose Paul Richter will come to-night. The only man, as usual, in a dress suit. Dear me, to think of there being only one dress suit in the whole town."

"Paul has a visitor. Perhaps he will wear one," comforted Cynthia.

"I saw him yesterday—he doesn't look like the kind. I suppose Miss Ashe will be there. Did she say anything yesterday?"

"She said she had been invited," answered Cynthia.

"Quite likely she will come. I wish—she's a very distinguished-looking girl. If we knew more about her! Perhaps she and Paul—I've always wished he'd marry and settle down here. Amy Richter was my best friend—and some nice girl would keep him here—Has she said anything about Paul to you?"

"Only that she thought him quite handsome—"

"Aha!—who knows?—it may be the beginning—I used to think it might be you and Paul—"

"Mercy," laughed Cynthia, "what made you think so?"

Mrs. Stanford turned and faced her with slow dignity.

"It's not a laughing matter, Cynthia. The

Richters were one of our first families—and *any* young woman, least of all a Sweet-hills girl, might feel honored if Paul asked her—”

“I—I wasn’t laughing at the honor,” faltered Cynthia.

Mrs. Stanford did not reply.

In another bedroom another tirewoman waited on her lady.

Little Maggie Burrows, snatched from the commonplace undistinction of a too populous Burrows kitchen next door, puffed and tugged, scarlet-cheeked and important, at the lacings which drew closer and closer the Iron Maiden in which Mrs. Floy Harmon cased her ebullient figure.

Mrs. Floy, her face overlaid with cold cream and talcum, flashed her gray eyes stormily with each fresh bite of the steel.

“I can’t see why such things get to be the fashion. Where a person has good hips, why can’t they use them? I hate these straight bean-pole shapes.”



"Your shape is grand," admired Maggie. "It goes in and out so wavy-like."

"Oh—my form's all right," admitted Mrs. Floy. "Ouch, Maggie—there, you've let that slip—oh, you can—you must—I couldn't get into my dress. It's a perfectly dear dress—try again—I'll breathe out, and hold tight—there's no use talking—I've got to get into it. I'm crazy about my dress."

"It's a grand dress," said Maggie.

"Oh, it's awf'ly chick and pretty. Martha made it nicely. She'd have done better though if I'd had her here to fit—but, of course, I wouldn't have her in my house—"

"Mom says, mebbby some day he'll come back and marry her—"

"Sh!—you mustn't talk about such things, Maggie; it isn't nice for little girls— There now, tie it good and tight—*tight*, I said—that's it. Now for the dress; it certainly is Frenchy."

"I know somebody'll think so," said Maggie shrewdly, "somebody that lives in a big brown house."

Like Miss Squeers's maid, Maggie was not above adroit flattery. Mrs. Floy mantled charmingly.

"Mr. Vessey?" she smiled. "He'll be there of course. All the gentlemen will." She pronounced it "jomp men."

"I bet Paul Richter'll wear his dress suit, too."

"Of course—we'd look well if we did the march together—this is full dress, you know—"

She raised her full arms, bare half-way to the shoulder, and stared dreamily at her reflection.

"It's a lower neck than I've ever worn before—"

"It's terrible low," said Maggie with awe.

"No, it's not really low, Maggie—you don't understand such things. In some places it wouldn't be low at all. But Sweethills is old-fashioned. A woman daren't show her neck, no matter how fine it is—and shoulders!"

Mrs. Floy shrugged hers expressively.

"I know—like cig'ret pichers," said Maggie.

"No," frowned Mrs. Floy, "like ladies in real society. *Nice* ladies, Maggie. I've seen some cut to the waist in the back—"

Maggie exclaimed properly.

"I bet Mr. Richter's comp'ny'll be there, too—"

"Well, he won't make any difference—he's so very homely."

"But maw heard yestiddy he's awful rich. Owns three automobiles an' a great big house to New York. His pop was president of the bank, there."

Mrs. Floy put down her powder-puff consideringly.

"I wonder if it's true. Folks are such gossips—and why's he in Sweethills then—" She swung slowly around and stared at herself in the glass. "If it *is* true—I'm glad I bought this silver embroidery. They're wearing it so much in New York, the papers say—"

A little dreamy smile played about Mrs. Floy's mobile mouth. Such a smile as wakens

on the face of a hunter when the open season for game is announced.

It was at this precise moment that the subject of her thought emerged from his bath, very much scrubbed, and red-looking above his blue, terry-cloth bath gown, and thrust an inquiring head into his host's bedroom.

"God of Jacob, not a *dress suit*! My dear fellow, I thought we were in Podunk. I was going to wear tweeds."

Paul, wrestling with a collar-button, turned toward him with a mild frown.

"You won't see any others. But it's expected of us—not for worlds would I disappoint my constituency. I don't know though—what the deuce do you go for—with your throat? The night air—"

"Are you a physician?" cut in Heiney. "Who asked your advice? Of course I'm going, old man—I wouldn't miss it, I'm going to be as bucolically gay as any of the others. Besides, 'there's a reason.'"

Paul shrugged and swung back to his glass.

"Do you think she'll be there?" he asked shortly.

"Why not?—something tells me this is to be an auspicious evening in my career—I've had the feeling before—an itching in my palm."

"Something tells me you're an ass," said Paul coldly.

Heiney, nursing his leg with both hands, rocked back and forth lazily for a moment. "I wonder—are we going to be rivals, Pauley? If we are, it's a handicap for me, little one. Women think me so winsome," he said dreamily.

"Don't think because your impudence and your money and—well—because you're *Heiney*, have got you off easy with women before now, that you'll have a walkover here," cautioned Paul tartly.

"That's a beautiful bow you've just tied." He rose with a slight yawn: "No, old fellow—I'm not thinking it."

Suddenly his trivial manner fell from him like a garment. "By God, Paul," he drew a

swift breath, "I'd give—I'd give, oh, well, just all I've got, to shake this damned throat and have a chance. I wish I'd dare to care now—"

"You're not serious—you," cried Richter scornfully.

Heiney fiddled with his bath-gown tassel a minute.

"I've not often been serious—have I? I've wasted my time and my substance on small game—but, Richter, just between us, I'd like to put some of the substance on her—pearls, ropes of 'em for her pretty neck—and diamonds to match her pretty eyes—"

"And a cold bottle and a hot bird for her pretty mouth. Damn you, do you think you can buy every woman's favor? I'll admit you've been pretty successful before—"

"That's just it—I can't, can I? I expect she has tons of pride with all her sweetness. And as you gently suggest, there's so little to curry favor with, apart from my ducats—"

He spoke lightly but his face was strangely wistful.

"I've got to travel on my looks and my amiability here—"

"Serve you right," said Paul,—*"and may I suggest, if you're going to exhibit them at to-night's function, that you'd better climb into your dress clothes, and not waste so much time? We're late now—"*

Heiney shot him an odd look. For the first time in their friendship a constraint had fallen between them—a bar to confidence. Paul was inclined to treat his self-revelation lightly!

Heiney took his cue quickly.

"I hasten to obey, my lord; may heaven grant our noble efforts be rewarded by a proper and sustaining amount of food."

"You won't eat anything you get," prophesied Paul.

"You don't know what your hill winds have done already—I could even eat you," and Heiney betook himself to his own quarters.

Thirty minutes later the two young men, muffled to the chin and properly bepumped and hosed, picked their way carefully over the half-frozen crust of mud which filled the path.

"I wish I were a 'bud' and used a slipper-bag," said Heiney, sinking into a tiny morass.

"You ought to be at home and in bed. This won't help you any."

"Wish I'd borrowed old Sime's carpet-slippers. What's that light over there mean?"

Most of the lights of the village had coalesced into a common glory of illumination which burst from the windows of the village hall; but to the right above the town shone a single star of light, like a golden tulip against the purple night.

It shone from the sitting-room of the old Ford house.

"That? Oh, that's just a light," said Paul carelessly.

"You don't say so!" cried Heiney; "not in a thousand years would I have guessed—"

But Paul was not heeding. He was thinking, "She hasn't gone yet."

Just for a moment he would have liked to run away from Heiney; to have turned up *her* road and knocked on her windows—there would have been no need for going to the silly



party at all when she was there—and he, too. They two—and the firelight. Who knew what pictures they might have read in the flames! But this red-headed pest beside him had arrived and been slaughtered, too. Who knew what lay ahead?

As they approached the village hall, human activity was evident.

People were flocking in like bees at a hive. The vestibule and cloak-room, a dingy paintless cubby, were full of wraps and coats and hats piled helter-skelter, and several persons in the act of piling more. There was an atmosphere of excitement, bay rum, flushed faces, moist hair and damp shoe-leather as the two young men, in perfect form, made their way to the entrance proper.

A knot of gaily dressed, sweetly scented ladies stood in the doorway.

One of them detached herself at their approach and greeted Paul with outstretched hands, and pretty coquetry.

“We were so afraid our star attraction wouldn’t come—and we’re so happy now.

You look awfully well, Mr. Richter; so awfully sweet of you to come—and, oh, dear!" There was a gentle start, a faint flush—or was this imagination?—as Heiney's face peered over Paul's shoulder—a swift dropping of eyelids, and the speaker hesitated.

"My guest," said Paul, "Mrs. Harmon—Mr. Van Vorden."

"Charmed," said Heiney solemnly, with an impressive bow.

"Oh, I'm *so* glad you've come too, Mr. Van Vorden. We're to have the loveliest march—I hope you'll enjoy yourself. I'm on the entertainment committee. I'll certainly have to see that you people have a good time—that is, of course, as good as you can have here. We're dreadfully slow and stupid. Not a bit like New York—where you can have such a perfectly lovely time."

Heiney regarded her owlshly.

"You like New York?" he asked gravely. "I'm sorry. In my opinion it's a beastly poor place. Absolutely nothing doing from one week's end to another—nothing." He shud-

dered as though memory evoked the dark specter of an eternal boredom, then like an autumn wind tossing aside an impeding leaf, he gently bowed himself past her into the room.

It sparkled and scintillated with the glories of a hundred Sweethills parlors (loaned for the occasion). It hummed with the murmurous vibration of most of Sweethills' tongues.

But Heiney was conscious of neither. He saw neither the mosaic of Brussels rugs, nor the prismatic plush chairs, nor the rainbow cushions nor potted ferns; he heard nothing of the sibilant trail of comment as he passed.

He saw only one figure far down the room.

She stood alone by a stand of plants—a white-clad girl with a face like a flower.

He made straight for her—as a worshipping Mohammedan ends his pilgrimage at Mecca—as a thirsty man wins a long-sought spring.

## CHAPTER XI

WHEREIN MR. VAN VORDEN'S HOPE MATERIALIZES AND MR.  
RICHTER'S DOES NOT, AND A MISUNDERSTANDING  
BETWEEN TWO FRIENDS IS CORRECTED

"WE have not been introduced," said Heiney gravely, "but I've always understood that 'everybody knows everybody else' in the country—and this is a party, anyhow—so I came over to ask you to talk to me."

"You might have got some one to introduce you," she suggested, smiling, "because it *is* a party. We seldom have them—but when we do we like to be very, very formal."

"What was the use? I know you perfectly—though I happen not to know your name; mine is Heiney."

She gave him a little weighing glance as though she would refuse an equal advance. But it was impossible to withstand either the supplication, or the amiable camaraderie of his manner.

"Mine is Cynthia Field," she said simply.

"It sounds like a musical phrase—like three notes on a muted 'cello." He looked at her gravely, then dropped back to his earlier manner. "That, I believe, was worthy of our friend Richter—I'm more of a poet than I dreamed. Do you know him? I happen to be visiting him—"

"Very well. I went to school with him—"

"I've always felt that my education lacked something. I know what now. I went to Vevay in the bread-and-butter stage. Nothing but boys—a male brutish way to grow up."

She smiled.

"I think I've heard—we know everything in Sweethills—that you've repaired that damage since, very thoroughly."

"There," he said, "I knew it. That outrageous Richter is as vile a gossip as any old woman. I wouldn't look at a woman. My whole early life, darkened and deprived by the lack of coeducation, has warped me so I—I—upon my word, I doubt if I could address one properly."

"You don't do badly," she encouraged, laughing; "with a little practise you'll be expert. What I'd like to know though is why you came to-night?"

"It might interest you to know. As I was driving up to Paul's on Thursday I passed a house—big brown house on the edge of the town. A girl was in the garden. 'Maid was in the kitchen,' you know, 'hanging out the clothes'—she was in a gingham apron, shaking out a rug. Doesn't sound poetic, does it? It was. She looked like the first rose of summer. I had a feeling she'd be here to-night—that's why I came."

He flicked an imaginary mote from the knee of one impeccable trousers leg, then looked at Cynthia's warming cheek. But she spoke unembarrassedly.

"I saw the stage go by. Afterward—we heard all of the gossip about you. I hope you're going to get better—to get very, very well here." She turned and met his eyes, her own full of sweet maternal solicitude that sent a sudden tingling through his veins, a lump to

his throat. He had a sudden, little boyish desire to creep close for comfort to the womanliness of her.

"You're very good," he said huskily; then, in a sudden horror at his emotion, he snatched at his impish mood again. "What are they going to do to-night, Cynthy?—you don't mind my calling you Cynthy, occasionally, do you? I'll bet a dollar dozens of people call you that. In novels about rural places, your name always reads 'Cynthy.' Correct me if I am wrong."

"You may be right—about the novels. But very few murder my name in that fashion. I'm rather proud of it myself—it's so old-fashioned and quaint."

"Yes, you're right—it's far too melodious to be mutilated. Cynthia!" he repeated feelingly.

"Wouldn't you like to meet some of these people?" she asked. "If you're going to be in Sweethills you ought to feel like knowing our people."

"I feel like knowing the youth across the way, with the tan shoes and the large red ears, who keeps glaring at us."

"That," she rippled into a soft laugh, "is Cyrus Brownlee, the postmaster's son. He is probably in despair over your dress suit."

"More likely he is in despair over *you*; he looks as if some concealed emotion was gnawing his damask cheek; he probably thinks he can get by me and carry you off for a dance. It will be over my dead body."

"Dance!" cried the girl; "we never dance in Sweethills. That's for the godless, the unsaved. Some of us, though, would like to," she added wistfully.

"You, pretty Cynthia? I'd like to teach you," he said under his breath. "Then why, may I ask," he inquired aloud, "are the two gentlemen in the different colored uniforms beginning to tinkle on the piano and horn?"

"They furnish the music for the grand march. It will begin in a minute and last for half an hour. Mrs. Harmon has arranged



for very elaborate figures. It's a walking-dance, you know, which is different and more proper than a dancing-dance."

"Mrs. Harmon—the plump party in pink with the signs of the zodiac worked in beads all over her?"

She turned her head and looked at him again, gravely, reproachfully.

"Your education *was* neglected, Mr. Van Vorden. No one has taught you to be kind."

"Kind," he echoed; "lord—I thought it was out of fashion—to be kind—"

"Some of us don't mind being unfashionable," she reproved him.

"It's becoming to 'some of us,' " he said, smiling. "You're right," he added, "I'm a regular curmudgeon. I'm a regular little beast. Perhaps you will teach me—about being kind, I mean."

She looked at him consideringly.

"I don't believe you're as bad as you sound. I think—it's just a way you have—to sound clever."

"We're progressing at an alarming rate.

You're abusing me already. People always impose on me."

"You won't be serious and admit it. I shouldn't be surprised if you're really the kindest-hearted person here."

"Horrors!" cried Heiney; "you'll be asking me to go calling for the missionary society or to contribute to the local soup fund, or give away my dill-pickle recipe. I assure you I haven't a shred of heart; I'm considered a regular snow-image. Why is everybody beginning to stand up?"

"The march is to begin; Mrs. Harmon will lead. She is going to select her partner."

"There is no use of her looking in my direction—I'm going to march with you—if you'll let me. Richter will probably murder me; I don't see why he hasn't before this. Why does he keep hovering around the door?"

"He hasn't let you know!" she said quickly. "I'm sorry for him—this evening. He's waiting for some one who isn't coming. We call her the Spring Lady. Her real name is

Margarita Ashe. She's the girl who's taken the Ford place for the spring."

"I hadn't heard," said Heiney, a new puzzlement gathering in his eyes. "You don't mean to tell me—what a pair of asses! And what's the matter with the old owl's eyes? You don't mean to say he's trailing a different girl?"

"I don't understand you," she began.

"I do," he said. "This house she's taken? Could one see it's light coming down from Paul's house—where two roads join, I think?"

"That's it—a lovely old place, full of flowers. And she's the loveliest girl—"

"O thou deep Richter! 'Just a light.' Now by the gods, Cynthia, your tidings lighten my heart. Thou hast restored two erstwhile friends to each other's bosoms. Come. The lilt of the music creeps into my veins. The Pink Lady hath taken a partner—the leading Politician in the frock coat. Shall we march? *En avant!* On to the cabaret!"

They got up and found places in the snake-like straggling line of marchers forming down

the room. In a few minutes, at a fierce bray of the cornet, Mrs. Harmon and Mr. Vessey started their series of caracoles and evolutions and their followers wove docilely after them. Time after time Van Vorden found himself separated from the slim white-clad girl only to be reunited for some brief curve or parabola of the figure.

At last it was done. An experience at once novel and moving to the man.

"By jove—this is the neatest little novelty I've ever encountered—it beats the tea-dance every time. Shall we return to our place by the conservatory? Stay, it is occupied already by the youth with the ears, and his young lady. Can't we go anywhere else?"

Yes, they could go into the adjoining room and look at the year's display of fancy work produced by the club. Heiney qualified immediately as a needlework expert and in the privacy of the varicolored exhibition discoursed learnedly on reticelli and drawn-work, as well as various other "ships and shoes and sealing-wax."

"You must meet some of the others," said Cynthia firmly, "or I shall be hated all my life." And she led him forth and forced him out of her presence for the next hour.

He accepted it philosophically; making himself impressive for a number of delighted village damsels. But at the close of the evening, though he had a mere tag of a voice left, he captured Cynthia in the cloak-room.

"I'm going to walk out to the big brown house with you," he vowed.

"You ought to go home and go to bed," said Cynthia promptly; "you shouldn't have come to-night, Mr. Van Vorden. You can scarcely whisper now—"

"That's what Richter thought. He wanted to put me to bed. I'll go to-morrow if you'll come up and read to me. But to-night—no."

She continued to object. He really should not, and there was Mrs. Stanford, too—. He swallowed Mrs. Stanford willingly; he even put on her rubbers, kneeling on the floor on his immaculate knees.

On the way up they were silent—or rather the young people were, for Mrs. Stanford conducted a monologue embracing the merits and the faults of the evening, embroidered about a subtle introduction to the social divisions of the village.

She felt that she had left a very impressed young man at the door as she bade them good night. Heiney's bow and uncovered head were singularly satisfying.

"Come in shortly, Cynthia," she said, "I shall need you."

There was gentle reproof, delicate patronage, faintest condescension in her tone. It implied an explanation to the amiable young man she was leaving.

Appearances were so misleading. Cynthia was rather pretty, and of course a stranger could not know. In a village it was difficult to tell. He had treated Cynthia and herself alike. She had heard that Paul's guest was very wealthy, and while Cynthia was not exactly a servant, he really ought to know—.

So she tried to indicate the difference by the cadence of her voice.

Had he been listening he could have had no doubt, but he was not. He was watching the curves of Cynthia's face against the doorway, the turn of her head.

A timid moon had broken through a scurry of purple clouds, and a night wind, restless as quicksilver, blew down the valley.

"It's bad for you," the girl said, "you ought to stay indoors by the fire these keen nights. The days are all right—when the sun's bright and warm—but it's always sharp in the spring when the sun goes down—"

"Everything seems to be bad for me—that one really wants to do," he said huskily.

"But you want to get well," she said.

"I don't know," he said doubtfully; "I do—if the route isn't too stiff."

"But you must think of others—the people who care and who want you to—"

He was silent a moment looking up at the silver and purple of the sky.

"In that case it's hardly worth the effort,"

he said quietly. "You see it happens that there's no one to care."

"Oh!"

It was the faintest exclamation, quickly checked. He turned to her gravely.

"Cynthia," he said, "I'd like to ask you something. It may sound ridiculous, but it means a great deal to me. In the absence of my imaginary 'next of kin' would it be an imposition to ask you to take a friendly interest in me—a sort of—oh, well, a little make-believe solicitude to hearten me up and boost me over the rough spots, as it were—to prop my spineless, jelly-fish temperament."

She put up her hand quickly.

"Oh," she said, "but it won't be make-believe. I do feel interested. Ever so much so."

He smiled a little sadly. She was so quick; so ready. Too quick; too ready. He didn't lack *friends*.

"Perhaps—I hope I won't be robbing others?—your 'nearest and dearest' won't object?"



She smiled wistfully.

"Oh, it won't. I'm like you—I haven't—there is no 'nearest and dearest.' "

"Then," he said, "it's high time you got one." And he stooped and kissed the hand he had taken. He said good night then, and she watched him for a little as he went down the road.

Afterward, when she had finished ministering to Mrs. Stanford, she sat for a while before her dresser in her plain little bedroom.

She had slipped out of the white dress and sat bare of arms and neck, her brown hair like a mist about her face.

Her room was cold; the window open to the April night, but she was not cold.

The lamplight gilded her hair, touched softly the pure lines of her throat and arms. Her little mirror lured, beckoned; it whispered, "Look at me; see what I tell you; it is true—you are lovely, lovely."

But Cynthia did not look at herself. Her gaze was absent, inward; her mouth tender,

half-smiling at some remembered thing. After a little she went over to her window and stood.

A few lights still shone from Sweethills' homes. One of them, low-lying through the trees, held her eyes long. It shone from the windows of Paul Richter's house. Far above it she could see the bright light in the Spring Lady's house.

She watched first one, then the other.

Presently she came back to her post before the dresser. But the smile was gone from her lips; the warmth from her cheek.

Suddenly she put her head down on her arms and was very still. . . .

## CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH THE SMALLNESS OF THE WORLD IS DISCOVERED,  
AND A GENTLEMAN FEELS CALLED UPON TO PROTECT  
THE PUBLIC MORALS

THE valley was awake now. The last torpors of the winter were gone, the last ice-bound brook released, the last snow-crust melted.

Mountains and river-flat shone with a new soft luster. A faint haze of leaf-bloom like a delicate fog began to creep between the eye and the naked tree-boughs. The arbutus had ceased blooming, but there sprang up now a myriad of tiny blooming creatures, to take its place—pale-cupped hepaticas, the first violets, windflowers, trilliums.

In the Spring Lady's garden the crocuses spangled her lawn like the sequins on a jeweled robe.

Ann Ford's wedding ring was bursting into gold—and two of the flaunting crimson

tulips asked for admiration. Nor was this all. Among the late blooming growth the leaven of sun and warmer wind was evident. Buds swelled and threatened to burst shortly, young shoots broke delicately from the dead heart of last year's growth—young leaves, curled up like babys' fingers, waited for the kiss of the sun.

Even the rusty old hedge trimmed its topmost branches with frills of pale green. And among and over all, filling the air with soft important cheeping, with bursts of happy carol, with little silver cascades of ecstatic music, the birds welcomed the spring-time.

Rita Ashe could see it all from her window as she sat among her pillows. Her old-fashioned casement open to the morning was like a window to all outdoors.

Near at hand, in the apple tree and in the elm by the gate, all the stages of domestic drama were being lived. Tiny lovers preened and flirted their feathers bewitchingly before one another; small engaged couples were busy

selecting household sites; married ones were actively bearing wisps of straw and feathers to places already chosen. One beady-eyed little robin-lady already sat guard at the opening in a dead apple limb.

Beyond all this, beyond the guardian hedge, stretched the blue and green and gold masses of the valley. She drank it in wide-eyed, the soft air on her naked throat.

There came a morning shortly when her soul cried out against her slothfulness.

"I'm going out—far, far, 'over the hills and far away.'"

She sprang up and dressed quickly, and fled out of the old house. She went bareheaded and coatless. She went without breakfast and heedless of Seraphy Bassett, who pursued her to the gate with a pair of overshoes, and prophecies of death.

She had never wandered in the hills alone, but this morning her feet like gipsies led her straight to the highest ones. She filled her lungs with the sweet hill air—and threw back her head to the sunshine. And she climbed as

she had never known she could climb—lithely, strongly she went through thicket and bramble, past great mossy boulders, over tiny creeping streams, around vine-circled fallen logs; through the hushed vigil of the pine grove.

She moved like one in an enchantment; the very spell of spring, of nascent life, lay on her. She was one with it all as she had never thought to be. A strange hunger and possessiveness for it all filled her.

Once a blackberry runner caught at her skirt. She unfastened it with tender hands. It was a long, slim, reddish spiral dotted with tiny, green leaf buds. She fingered them lovingly.

“You’re part of it all,” she said, “you’re part of summer, you little waking thing.”

Once she dropped beside a patch of sweet young grass, and buried first her hands, then her face in it. She got the fragrance of leafing wintergreens, of tiny moist mosses in her nostrils.

“Oh, I love you,” she whispered.

At last she stood, blown and warm, high on

the mountain's face. Here, too, the air was vocal with bird gossip, with the great crows flashing silver-winged against a cloudless sky. And a strange emotion filled her; something caught at her heart like a living hand; filled her eyes with sudden tears.

"How much I've missed," she said, "and *he's* missing it, too—"

Her mind brought her another picture. She saw a wide smooth thoroughfare, full of flashing vehicles and motors, lined with stately handsome buildings—and above, where one seldom looked, an oblong of sky.

There were people. A great many women—richly dressed women going and coming on trivial business—the business of getting clothing, the business of eating—the business of the theater, the business of pleasure—

She looked down at herself and laughed. Her blue serge was wrinkled and shapeless. By the trim standards she had known, she was a tramp. Her shoes were worn and spotted with mud, her hands scratched and darkened

from her garden work. Across her cheek now stood out a welt made by the vicious whip of a hemlock bough.

Already she had lost the delicate cared-for pallor of her former life; only her splendid hair triumphed in her new life. But she laughed.

"And perhaps I ought to be in a psychopathic ward. *They* would think so."

Some saving grace of humor flowering in this strange madness of hers brought the quick ripple of laughter to her lips.

It was a nice little laugh—a wind-blown, sweet-hearted laugh as clean and clear as a little mountain brook.

It surprised even herself. She had not known she could laugh like that. She could not remember laughing aloud—a genuine mirthful laugh—in years. To conjure it again she yielded further to her picture-making. She put herself into Sherry's, into Mailard's, into the Plaza, a dozen others, among the pretty, silken, peacock women of her acquaintance, just as she was, wrinkles, and mud,



and sunburn, and all. The idea was too delicious. The little laugh came trembling to her lips again.

She looked around her with a sudden wistful delight.

"That sounded as if I was perfectly happy."

At her feet a tiny sheltered patch of anemones bloomed. She picked the tiny delicate things and caressed them absently.

Presently she fell into a reverie that was made of mist and sunshine, of turquoise sky and shining river, that led nowhere except to what seemed like an infinite happiness.

Five times the Spring Lady broke the bounds of her sheltered garden and climbed the greening hill-slopes.

Each new adventure brought her new strength, greater endurance of wind and muscle.

The sixth ramble she took came off when Martha Bruce was sewing in the old house. The little dressmaker and her tiny hand-machine busied themselves in the old sitting-room

among billows of snowy muslin and lawn, which Martha's magic was to transform into the tucked and feather-stitched creations to trim this slim, golden-haired, sweet-faced young woman *who did not mind*.

In all her life Martha had never seen so beautiful a girl, she thought. She had a passion for the beautiful, this little country seamstress, that was rapidly being starved out of her by the passion of the village for bretelles, and flounces, and appliques, and beads. But here was some one who wanted merely lines—who had them herself, long, lovely, faintly curving lines—who would look in the slim sheath of white muslin like a half-furled calla lily.

There was worship as well as skill in Martha's fingers as they wrought. She felt no pang of jealousy at her little son's adoration of his "pitty lady"; she watched with sympathy the little fingers weaving in the bright hair, was glad when he put up his bud of a mouth for a kiss.

When Rita begged that he might go with

her she assented gladly, and she watched them go down the winding road as long as she could see them. Something she had heard in the village made her frown—but after a little that faded.

The place where they stopped to rest was such a place as Corot would have loved to paint—a sudden break in the woodland, where in the lush undergrowth a spring bubbled up and spread in a little pool that lost itself in a rich clump of vivid skunk cabbage and slender iris.

Two trees stood out from all the rest— young beeches, graceful limbed, poised like dancing-girls, close by the little spring. A fallen log lay near, half-lost in new-leaved creepers; and there were violets and thick mosses, like patches of emerald plush.

The child ran ahead laughing and crowing. The soft quiet of the little spot was suddenly broken. A furry beast, its fat brown tail reared, leaped clumsily away from its nibbling at the log; a tiny snake like a thread of bronze

slipped down silently under the nodding mandrake umbrellas.

"Dat was a woodchuck," the child announced solemnly. "I can see where he eated."

"How exciting, darling—and we drove the funny fat thing away. Perhaps he was afraid of two such tramps."

She gathered the soft little body to her eagerly.

It was at this moment when the two sat cheek to cheek like a hamadryad and her son at play, that a man stepped out from the shelter of the trees and saw them.

It was Mr. Henry Van Vorden, late of New York, on his way to a ramble in the hills.

Mr. Van Vorden was whistling—or had been whistling. Also he was carrying a handful of violets. The flowers fell out of his hand unnoticed; the whistle died in mid-air as he watched.

Then the hamadryad saw him. Her arms slipped from the child's body and she stood up silently, the color gone from her face.

"Good lord—it *is* you—the lost is found—the missing Princess Rita"—he took off his cloth cap with a sweep, then as he saw that she could not speak: "Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?"

He came over to an oak stump and dusted the old cobwebs from it and sat down with a great show of nonchalance, but his eyes were covertly watching her.

It took her a minute to fight off the shock; then, a little pale, breathless, with a pretense of ease like his own, she bade the child run and play and took her seat again.

"Where shall we begin?" invited Heiney, taking the reins in his hands. "Shall we discuss the city—and our special reasons for being out of it—or shall we ignore the personal and cling to the general, interesting ourselves in the fauna and flora that confront us?"

She was still fighting for control. "So it *was* you I—saw—what I'd like to know really . . . I thought the world was bigger."

"Big enough to run away and hide in, Rita?" asked Heiney gravely. "I'm told on

the best of authority that it seldom proves to be. Doesn't it say in the Bible,—or is it the Almanac—'Be sure your sins will find you out'?"

"But you!" Her face was pale. "How did you—you didn't know—nobody sent you? Why are *you* here?"

"I'll be kind and end your suspense quickly. I'm here for a rotten throat which threatens to mar my career, so I came here—to my old pal Richter's."

She smiled faintly, ruefully.

"And you found—me. Why, I thought I was lost to the world—dead to it—to everything."

"For a dead woman you look remarkably thriving, Princess. I like those togs—though, if I recall correctly, in your former incarnation you would have given up the ghost before you'd have worn 'em."

"What am I going to do now?" she asked, and it was as though she spoke to herself alone.

He answered. "Don't worry about me,

Rita—I'm a good sport, I hope. Whatever your reasons for shaking the old crowd—and Larry and bridge-parties and theaters and fizz-water, etc.—I'll never say peep about your hiding-place—"

He stopped suddenly, an odd expression on his face, as though struck by a sudden thought.

"It wasn't—it couldn't have been—your coming here—it wasn't money?"

"Money," she said contemptuously.

"Don't slight it. It's a good thing, Rita—you've used it yourself at times. I only meant—I thought you knew perhaps about Larry."

"Larry," she repeated sharply.

"His plunging,—oh, don't look so wild. He's gone in pretty deep, it seems. Market caught him short. Rather pinched him, I judge. He'll get on his feet again."

"He always does. Money and stocks—money! The money-market! It's all he thinks of—"

"Don't abuse it, Rita. It pays the piper for you girls—but I was thinking. If it was money that made you run away and rusticate?"

—I've known the feeling sometimes—I've got a little of my own lying round loose. If the dressmakers, or your bridge-bills, or your luncheons—"

"Thank you, Heiney, you are good; but it wasn't money. It's a matter of indifference to me—Larry's losses. I couldn't expect you to understand. Why should you?"

"Don't insult my intelligence. Test me. I occasionally have gleams of reason. If I could help you, Rita?"

"I know"—she softened—"you're a good boy, Heiney Van Vorden. You haven't got hard like the rest. Somehow you've kept a human spot—that makes you different. That's what I wanted—so I left—"

He whistled softly. "You mean—you didn't like the clip you were going—the gay and giddy whirl?"

"It choked me," she cried. "Oh, I know it satisfied me for a long time—you can't understand—how could you when I don't myself?—but I was drowning in it, Heiney—in the hundreds of little, little things—that I wasted



my time with—and in the pretense, the make-believe of everything—I wanted to get out into the country. I *had* to come.”

“And you came to Sweethills,” he pondered.

“I stopped at Sweethills,” she corrected, “I never had heard of it—but I like it.”

“You mean—you ran away like a gipsy and let your feet find the way?” he asked incredulously.

She nodded.

“I took a little bag with some necessities—and I chose a little station out of a lot on one of the suburban lines. I bought a ticket there. When I got to the place I changed to another railroad line and did it again. I did it three times. It was the first real fun I’ve ever known. I hadn’t a thing to care about, you see—I was just wandering. At the third place, the country began to look hilly and pretty—a road ran off into the hills from the station—and a man was driving sheep up among the boulders and pine trees. It smelled heavenly. So I walked. I saw a bluebird—the first I’d ever seen. I walked

all day. At night I paid for a room in a farmhouse. And the next day I walked again—all day. And I came to Sweethills”—

“Well I’ll—be—kicked,” whistled Heiney, “the vagabond princess—”

She smiled.

“And I found the little house I’m in and I’m going to stay—all summer perhaps.”

“And you blotted yourself out of our lives not a hundred and seventy miles from New York. You’re a genius, Rita.”

“It was my feet,” she smiled.

“Well, you look perfectly corking. It’ll set you up at any rate. And I notice,” he laughed, “you’re willing to keep your hand in on poor Richter. Shame on you—with your talk about sham”—

“I don’t want him,” she flashed. “Keep him away, Heiney. He’s come three times with his play. And—habit’s strong. If he comes—there’s a beastly false side to me, I suspect—or else it’s just that I’m so used to flirtation—and *seeing* flirtation—”

“Oh, keep on playing, Rita,” he said cheer-

fully, "I like old Richter—but he's a bit of an ass at times. It'll do him good to be played *with*. He's rather used to turning the tables."

"I don't want him," she repeated; "I don't want any man—"

"But you can't lose 'em. When you go back? There's Larry, you know."

"Don't you realize," she cried, "I'm not going back, Heiney?"

"You're not serious. What about Larry?"

"I hate Larry."

He leaned over and pulled a few blades of grass idly.

"I've an idea Larry doesn't suspect—quite *that*. I saw him before I left. He spoke of you. Said you'd gone away on a visit—but expected you back later;—he's looking badly—"

"I hate him," she repeated, but there was a little quaver in her voice.

There was a moment's silence. Then a sound came to them. A bird's song, liquid, soft, alluring, floated down from one of the

beeches. It was a mating-song, thrilling with the call of life, poignant with passionate tenderness, joyous with sweet faith in its Creator. Of such strains is nature's sweetest litany made.

At the sound the woman buried her face in her hands and began to cry softly.

Van Vorden watched her a moment, distressed, then he went over and stood beside her. The child had run off into the brush. He put one hand on her shoulder and spoke.

"Look here, Rita—I'm sorry I stumbled on you. Whatever distaste you've got with life—whatever tangle you and Larry have got into—you shall work it out in peace as far as I'm concerned. I've always guessed that you were different—that you had deeper, finer stuff in you than the other women—and I've a feeling now that you'll work everything out all right. Don't be afraid on my account—I only want you to know—I'm your friend, Rita—if there's anything I can do to make it easier or help you out . . ."

She looked up wet-eyed but smiling.

"You are a good fellow." She smiled and she put out her hand. "We've always liked you, Heiney—but you're proving my theory. One has to get away from the press of things, from the *pace*, really to find people out. Here in the woods we know each other better than ever—the best of us.—Yes, I want you to be my friend—even though you must keep away from me. . . . You must help me by ignoring me."

He took her hand and held it a moment.

It was at this auspicious moment that a certain gentleman, having come to look over some upland timber land, chanced to glance into the shadow of the little glen in passing.

He was in time to see the girl's tears; to see Heiney approach her, take her hand. It was a spectacle at once diverting and interesting to the spectator, whose approach through the brush had been unnoticed.

He departed after a brief interested pause, with elaborate precautions of silence. An unpleasant smile decorated his face. In fact the

subtlest smile he possessed—a smile to discountenance La Gioconda—

The gentleman was Mr. Porter Vessey. Out in the open he took off his hat and respired and inspired deeply. It was as though he would purge his lungs of an impure ether lately inhaled.

“I was right—right,” he triumphed, “she’s off-color—she’s either a plant of Van Vorden’s—or that type. People ought to know—*ought* to know.”

He strode suddenly down the hillside like one inspired with a new and holy zeal. Mr. Vessey knew his own value. As a munificent contributor to his church, to his secret societies, to his town, he conserved in his sacred person forces of a mixed and potent character. He suddenly realized this with new zest.

Only once did he speak before he reached the town. It was to utter the single, apparently irrelevant word “Masher,” as he went.

And the way of his going lay in the direction of Mrs. Floy Harmon’s home.

## CHAPTER XIII

REFLECTIONS ON DIVERS MATTERS, ESPECIALLY THE CASE  
OF MARTHA BRUCE

**THE JOURNAL:**

Three weeks!

The trees are in leaf now.

The big lilac bushes by the gate are out in bud—and the clumps of peonies are thick with leaves. Most of the birds have married and gone to housekeeping.

When I think of the apple trees the last of this month, as Seraphy tells me they will be, covered with pink and white bloom, like great chiffon parasols, with all those tiny chirping bird-babies tucked away among the blossoms, I can scarcely wait—.

I've grown so big and coarse and black. I hardly know myself—when I think about myself. I've been almost too busy. There's so much to be done in the garden.

At first I only played at it, but after Seraphy showed me I found lots of real things to do. There were so many dead leaves, so many brambles, and old limbs, and pieces of rank undergrowth. I bought a great pair of shears and a rake at Brownlee's and the three of us have been kept busy.

To-day we freed the larkspur from a lot of dead wood and tidied up the asparagus bed. There's a lot of tough tangled runner that Seraphy calls "catfoot." I tore out a great patch to-day that was running in among the lilies-of-the-valley. They're up in a great sheet. They make me think of little green ears springing out of the earth to catch the whisper of the south wind, and the first robin notes. There are going to be millions of blossoms.

To-night I'm stiff and sore and sleepy—and happy. I'm getting over the soreness better than I used to. I'm getting tough from my hill climbing.

I've had a bath in a great zinc wash-tub—



and a piping hot supper of bacon and eggs, toast and cream and spiced peaches—and now I'm in one of Martha's new "wrappers"—a pretty, cheap, little flowered chintz, I saw in the village shop.

Seraphy has lighted a fire in the old grate and I'm scribbling in my little bedroom. I love this little room with its funny low ceiling, and the white walls where the fire puts patches of yellow glow or black spider-legged shadows from the furniture. The furniture suits it exactly, the old high bed, the rush-bottomed rocker and the tall worm-eaten old press.

I feel rich when I think of that old press. Martha has finished her sewing and folded it away. In its drawers lie three complete changes of underwear.

It is the coarsest, most exquisitely made stuff I've ever owned. I'm inordinately proud of it—but terribly extravagant to buy so much, with my finances in their present condition. I'm an improvident grasshopper—but I'm not going to worry—*yet*.

I went to church yesterday. The last time I went to church—Easter before last, I think—it was in one of the big Fifth Avenue churches.

It was the year they wore those fruit trimmings. A woman sat in front of me with a wreath of tomatoes on her hat. Lots of us learned to know something of garden produce that season.

There was music of course. There always is—grand, big, creepy music like some parts in the grand opera.

There was neither music nor hats in the church on Sunday. I could have cried over the hats. I *did* cry over the music.

If ever a helpless, innocent hymn was foully and dreadfully murdered, while many watched but none interceded, it was when that little semicircle of choir opened its rather wide mouths.

Seraphy had freshened my clothes up for the occasion and my Bond Street coat and little old Georgette hat quite triumphed.

I slipped into a back seat and thought I'd get off unnoticed—but it was not to be so.

They came around me by dozens—these pleasant, curious, badly-dressed, kindly-faced women. They took my hand, and pressed it, and asked me how I liked it here and whether I wasn't lonely and was it true I was a writer like Paul Richter, or was I a teacher, and was I going to stay through until winter, and didn't I miss my relatives—and didn't they mind my coming here to stay—and by gentle hint and innuendo would I please tell all about me.

I was evasive. I grasped desperately at the usual topic and we discussed the weather with almost passionate enthusiasm.

But they were kind. One old lady slipped a tract into my hand, another offered to get me a Sunday-school class to teach—a third is coming up to teach me a "nice crochet stitch" and bring me some new honey when it's ready.

Cynthia brought over her employer—a Mrs. Stanford—a pompous person with a

great many black ornaments, and a lorgnette manner.

I think she's a little suspicious of me. I was too non-committal about my family, or rather my mother's and father's families. And I couldn't tell whether I was a connection or not of the Marshfield Ashes she asked about.

She looked me over a little coldly. "We have had some fine people in our day, Miss Ashe—some exceptional families. You can still see the old family homes. The Richters and the Franklins were splendid people. You may have noticed the Franklin home as you came in on the train. A big gray place with a great deal of ivy."

She made me start when she brought out the name. But of course there must be a million Franklins scattered through the country.

I told her I remembered it but hadn't known its name. It's a big, charming old house with walled grounds, and a hemlock grove.

She gave me a bit of its history and some from her own family. Plainly she feels herself a personage. She brought up another

woman and introduced her—Mrs. Harland or Harmon—a handsome woman in a coarse overblown fashion, who was distinctly rude. Apart from these two, every one seemed simple and amiable minded.

Yet I must not be deceived.

From scraps I gathered from poor Martha Bruce—from bits of chatter I've overheard in the streets or the little shop, I know these same kind hearts can turn to adamant—can be implacable in the support of their narrow standards.

Seraphy says it's true of all villages. I was crude enough to gossip about Martha with Seraphy this afternoon.

She came to my room to fan my hair dry—she was dreadfully shocked because I washed it on Sunday—and she got quite “het up” as she put it, concerning Martha's case.

It seems Martha's was an unduly shocking case in that, as Seraphy put it, she was “no foot-loose street-runner like the most of young girls nowadays, but a quiet bookish little thing, who went out with the best.” Her father had

been cashier of the bank and they were highly respected people.

And Martha had never been known to have any social attentions. No young man had ever beaved her home to any one's knowledge, nor lingered on her door-step. Nor did she care for clothes as most girls do—only to make good ones for other people. But she was pretty for all that, Seraphy says, in a sweet inconspicuous way.

Then came the tragedy. The undreamed-of, the unbelievable occurred, and the good village, shocked to its heart's core, "passed by on the other side."

They did more. They drove her away from the communion table—they forced her from the church entirely: "The church," said Seraphy savagely, her comb avenging Martha on my helpless head, "that was built by our Lord for the need of sinners—they druv her away because she wa'n't good any more." There was a red spot on either of Seraphy's cheeks, a tremor in her voice. "I ain't settin' in judgment—but it ain't Scripture ner religion—

usin' the church for a social gatherin' an' to push out the errin'."

But about Martha. The girl wouldn't tell—and the village was baffled. The only man she had been seen with that summer was a traveling photographer who had talked to her once or twice in the post-office. It seemed very unlikely, even to the most indignant, to have been the photographer, but in the absence of other evidence the belief gradually gained ground that he had seduced Martha. A number of women, Seraphy says, destroyed the photographs and tintypes he had made of them.

And all of them sat in judgment on the girl. Out of all her many old friends and neighbors there was no one to pity or speak kindly. (No one, though I suspect one Seraphy Bassett, from her knowledge of the facts, and my knowledge of Seraphy.)

Even Miss Honey Hyslop, Martha's next-door neighbor, a devout Christian, who had in a way mothered the girl, refused to speak to her.

I can imagine the long, silent, dusky evenings of Martha's waiting. I wonder what she thought of—what she prayed for. I can almost guess. She would be that kind. But I'm glad it wasn't granted.

It must have been hard to go through it all—the cold looks, the words, the humiliation—and one sees in her face she has suffered, but afterward—when she had that little face to kiss—those little arms, it must have been different.

I asked Seraphy what she thought of it, of a place like this—of people who could do things like that.

She was silent for a moment.

"I almost hate it," I said impulsively. "I want to love it but how can I? How can I care for a place or a people who can be so bitter. Sweethills—what a name! *Heartburn* would be better."

"Wait," said Seraphy slowly, "it's true what you've said—it's a place where they's cruel and ha'sh at times—and turn against their own. But it ain't all they is to Sweethills.



It's folks like any other place—it's got a heart underneath. They's times when you can feel it beat. You wait an' see."

I *will* wait. In the meantime, in spite of Seraphy's hinted cautions to "go slow," I mean to be Martha's friend and help her.

I think life has frightened her. It will be nice to heal some of her fear—of my sex, at least.

I suppose she will always dread men. She's that type.

Her only hope and joy is in her little son. She seldom lets him out of her sight; she seems to be afraid some one will steal him. And I can't blame her—I'm tempted to run off with him myself.

The little thing was playing in the sitting-room with me the other afternoon when my pretty poet dropped in. He'd been here several times with his verses and plays before Martha came.

"Whose kiddie's that?" he asked, as the little thing perched himself on my lap and watched our caller gravely.

I told him and put the little Robbie through his paces. But Paul Richter has all the narrowness of standard of his neighbors.

He looked positively bored. I suppose one can't live in the atmosphere without being contaminated.

He did not stay long.

When he had gone Martha came in from the next room. She was white and shaking.

"What did—he say? What did he want?" she faltered.

"Why, nothing," I said; "he only asked Robbie's name."

She held on to the door in a genuine panic.

Presently she went over to Robbie and kissed him passionately.

"I'm so foolish," she said brokenly; "I'm always so afraid some one will take him from me—want to adopt him—some one who can give him more—I—I—sometimes I think I love him so much it's wicked. I—I get so much comfort from him," she said with a guilty flush.

Poor thing, I suppose she thinks she ought to wear a hair shirt.

I tried to reassure her. I told her I didn't think Paul Richter cared especially for children—he was so much taken up with his writing and his establishment and (I might have added) *himself*.

"Besides," I said, "you're his mother. No one could take him from you."

She was silent a moment, then she added oddly: "Does he come up here often—Mr. Richter?" I told her he had been several times.

"He is so very clever, isn't he?" she asked—a little wistfully, I thought.

I suppose there have been times in the past when even Martha has discreetly worshiped this splendid young village god. He has a way. I've been told there's scarcely a girl from fourteen up who doesn't reverence him as her ideal. Intellectually, they think—but the fact is his greatest appeal is physical. A magnificent *matinée* idol has gone to waste here.

I've missed so many things. Books, for instance—the kind that tell one about real things.

Yesterday in the village I saw a funny little brown house with a sign "Library" on it. I went inside. It was the oddest place—a tiny room with shelves of rather worn-looking books. A pretty black-eyed young girl chewing gum waited on me. For five cents one can have a book for two weeks.

I asked her could I have more than one. She had never run up against such a contingency and seemed floored. But she finally let me have three. One is Gray's *Field Manual of Flowers*—another Blanchan's *Bird Neighbors*. The third I chose from some curiosity, because of its contributor—the books are all donated. The fly-leaf held Paul Richter's name. The book is the poems of Swinburne. It seems not to have been read very much.

Surely it can not and have kept its place beside *The Life and Letters of Reverend Jeremiah Hill*. I don't know it. But then I

know little of any books, most of all poetry. I like Swinburne.

I'm going to read more. Perhaps that will help me.

I'm glad I had the talk with Heiney Van Vorden. He's a good boy and will keep my secret. I've met him several times walking with Cynthia and we preserve a stony blankness of countenance. Cynthia has asked me if I wouldn't like to meet him, but I find some convenient excuse. It wouldn't be safe. Neither one of us is a good enough actor. I'm glad that for some reason my poet has never asked me to meet him. I wish Cynthia would *like* him. Any one can see he's in love with her and she—. She doesn't seem to see through Paul Richter. But it isn't surprising, after all. I've never known a person so unsuspecting and *sweet-minded* as she.

It was good of Larry to shield me to him—to save me the newspapers, and detectives, and everything.

But he will have to take my going away as final. I wonder if he really looked ill.

## CHAPTER XIV

WHEREIN CYNTHIA IS CALLED UPON TO DEFEND A FRIEND  
AND DISCOVERS THAT A CERTAIN YOUNG GENTLEMAN  
MEANS NOTHING TO HER—NOTHING WHATEVER

“Of course she’s awfully sweet-looking and all that—” Mrs. Harmon rearranged her pose carefully. “But you can’t tell a thing by the looks, you know—and the fact is we know nothing about her.”

She was sitting in Mrs. Stanford’s seldom-used, and wholly stately, black walnut parlor, herself the only festal note in it with her florid coloring and a new and brilliant costume.

Calling hours in Sweethills, carefully aped from the larger centers, were frequently apt to conflict with those of the merely neighborly “visit,” which involved a cheerful and pleasant informality.

It would sometimes have been difficult to

discriminate as to which purpose the good ladies of the town designed an attack upon a residence, had it not been for an outward symbol and insignia which they consecrated to the formal.

A pair of white gloves and a certain composed, almost rigid expression of face betokened the latter.

Seeing Mrs. Harmon's approach, with the orthodox gloves, Mrs. Stanford and Cynthia had hastily forsaken their embroidery in the back sitting-room (and with it a half-formed intention of welcoming her at the informal side door) to throw open the double front entrance and admit a little light into the parlor. They were not mistaken; Mrs. Floy approached from the front, and her features were unmistakably ceremonial.

Five minutes later, the tension slightly relaxed, she was sitting opposite Mrs. Stanford and (slightly in the background) Cynthia.

It was Mrs. Floy's third call for the afternoon and she had a sense of having performed

a nice social custom and of making an excellent impression.

Privately she disliked Mrs. Stanford, who returned the compliment, but there was no evidence of this in the honied evenness of their tones, nor the courtly interchange of courtesy.

The conversation, like a restless butterfly, had alighted on numerous subjects—the weather, the vegetation, the difficulty of making calls properly, the spring styles, the lack of social functions and the minor potpourri that absorbed the village. But it had come to rest now on a subject that promised heavily of nectar, and it made delicate feints of attack before plunging into the richness that awaited it.

Mrs. Floy had begun. If there was an ulterior purpose in her carefully arranged calls, none would have guessed as she opened up with mild interest and pallid compliment of Sweethills' spring guest. Miss Ashe was so charming for a pale thin type—had Mrs. Stanford called?

Mrs. Stanford had not—she expected to in the course of a few weeks. Ah, Mrs. Stan-



ford probably knew more about her than they—she, herself, knew. She seemed so *mysterious* though, of course, perfectly sweet.

There must be a mystery—for no one seemed to know anything about her. But perhaps, Cynthia—who went up there so often—knew?

Pinned down, Cynthia faltered, tried clumsily to appear informed.

But Mrs. Floy's eyes brightened—her expression grew avid.

Perhaps it was a mistake for Cynthia to go there—perhaps Mrs. Stanford had best not go at all—perhaps she ought not to say—*really*—

“Say what?” Mrs. Stanford inquired with some sharpness.

“What some one—a gentleman—Mr. Vessey, in fact, told me—” Mrs. Floy looked down at her hands with pretty archness.

“Mr. Vessey!” There was open contempt in gentle Cynthia's voice.

“Why not?” Mrs. Floy's voice was acid.  
“Mr. Vessey is a perfect gentleman—too much

of one to tell a lady *everything*—but he knows—he's had experience—”

“I should think so,” scorned Cynthia.

Mrs. Floy colored in irritation. She was not unaware of Mr. Vessey's predisposition toward Cynthia. It was the one obstacle in her own path and she would have liked to slap Cynthia soundly now, even while thanking heaven that Mr. Vessey had no place in the girl's good graces.

“Mr. Vessey is often misunderstood,” she said coldly; “he's a very amiable man—and people—a great many women fancy he feels warmly for them when it's only his kindness of heart—to *anybody*, especially those who haven't much chance for attention—”

“Evidently *you* are not one who is going to misunderstand, Flora,” said Mrs. Stanford impatiently. “Just what did Porter Vessey say about Miss Ashe?”

Mrs. Floy temporarily pigeonholed Mrs. Stanford's thrust, for future reprisal.

“He said—well, he didn't give details—how could he?” She blushed. “But he met them

in the woods—Miss Ashe and Mr. Van Vorden. They did not know any one saw them. There's something *wrong*—about her. And of course Mr. Van Vorden, too—I'm sorry for you, Cynthia—you've taken him up too quickly, I'm afraid."

"Mr. Van Vorden is an excellent young man. He comes of splendid people, and is Paul Richter's *friend*," said Mrs. Stanford austere.

"Oh—Paul Richter's in it, too—he's up there nearly every day—men are so different—they have their own standard. And we have to forgive them—but a *woman*! I must say—to come here and live such a *secret* life—and she went to church, *actually*. For my part I shall not call. Mr. Vessey is not mistaken. He's not telling *all*. He—she spoke to him, *herself*, imagine! Mr. Vessey says he was utterly shocked—"

The conversational butterfly was deep in the nectar at last. Mrs. Stanford shook her head.

"Is it possible?—she *seems* refined. And

yet—I'm glad I wasn't over-hasty. I felt there was *something*, from the beginning."

"I believe it's all a lie." Cynthia's cheeks were scarlet. "You don't know her—and I do."

"The quicker you drop her the better—or people will *think*," Mrs. Floy paused.

"People may think what they like. I believe it's wicked—wicked gossip—"

"Thank you," said Mrs. Floy coldly; "other people are not so sure. A great many persons have felt that something's wrong—her coming here on the sly like this? If she's all right why doesn't she tell?"

"Why should she?" asked Cynthia hotly.

"Well—Mr. Vessey knows—and older and wiser people than you, Cynthia, and I prefer to take instruction from them."

"I shall *wait*." Mrs. Stanford's decision was for an armed neutrality.

"Nobody's going to call. We're going to give her the cold shoulder. You'd better take my advice, Cynthia. For a girl in your position—"

Mrs. Floy rose to make her adieus.

"I was *so* afraid your rheumatism would come on after seeing you out the other night." She smiled gently into Mrs. Stanford's eyes. "At your age, you can not be too careful—"

"No indeed—when I was *young*, like *Cynthia* here, I never believed a time would come when I'd regret all my light-headed imprudence. But we all grow to be careful with middle age."

The two women exchanged a glance warmly feline, while Mrs. Floy extracted a calling-card and laid it conspicuously on a console table. No call in Sweethills, without a card, was a call at all, even when one's hostess acted as maid. Mrs. Stanford watched her disappearing figure coldly. She took up the card presently and tore it to bits.

"Outrageous gossip—Flora Harmon! Always was—but she *may* be right, here. We'd better wait—it's well to be careful—"

Cynthia did not reply. Her breast rose and fell with indignation.

She felt a passionate loathing for the whole thing.

There was no *story* imaginable that would shake her stanch faith in any one she made her friend. This was some concoction of Porter Vessey's—absurd, grotesque, unworthy of a moment's credence. She dismissed it immediately. As for the rest, no suspicion or innuendo could hurt Rita Ashe with her.

And Heiney Van Vorden—it was untrue, absurd, of course—but it could have made no difference with her, anyhow. He meant nothing to *her*—absolutely nothing—

## CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH THE AFFLICTION OF ILLNESS FALLS UPON  
ONE YOUNG WOMAN AND THE AFFLICTION OF  
TONGUES UPON ANOTHER

### THE JOURNAL:

*Days* since I've written in this! We're in the middle of May now. I simply can't write as I thought I would. It was only when I was worried that I seemed to find an outlet in writing.

Now I'm not worried at all. I eat and sleep like a healthy animal and am getting fat and lazy and wind-browned.

There are hours when I do positively nothing! I've never known before what it meant to relax and simply breathe. But I know now. I could almost purr when I sit by my fire and watch the blue and gold crackle—or when I curl up in the armchair on the south porch.

I'm getting lazier every day—and happier. Perhaps it's the air or Seraphy's cooking.

I'm letting Seraphy do it all now. At first I pottered in the kitchen, too. I got her to teach me how to make biscuit and lovely brown molasses cookies. I got dreadfully tired and made several awful mistakes at first. Mixed parts of two different recipes—and once left out the "raising" and tried to put it in when the cookies were partly baked (little dabs on the end of a knife; Seraphy's contempt was terrible). But when I got to the point where I really did succeed and produce something edible, I lost interest.

Nothing seems to hold me. It's so easy to just loaf my hours away.

At any rate it's ridiculous to feel so contented when I *ought* to be worried—*gnawing* worried.

It's my money. I've got exactly enough to run my ménage four weeks and not a minute longer—and I'm no nearer solving the situation than I was when I came.

Instead of basking in the sun and snoring



soundly all night, I ought, like a provident ant, make an effort to replenish my finances—if I'm to stay.

And if I'm not what am I to do?

I thought about it a long time to-day—trying to face matters. Trying to realize. (One thing I do realize. I can not appeal to Larry for more money. I thought of that first. It seems to be the natural instinct for my kind to turn to a man for help. . . . And I suppose he would give it to me. He never denied me. . . .)

There seems to be no way—no honorable way for me to make money. I've never been trained for wage-earning. If only we girls had had some resource of that kind brought into our lives—instead of being allowed to fill our hours with clothes and dances and candy and matinées.

I never look at a business woman—and you can always know her—without a little secret pang of envy for her cool poise and self-re-

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liance. It must be good to know you can conquer.

I suppose Heiney Van Vorden meant what he said about lending me what I need. But I won't. Good heavens, how could I ever get it back?

We've had Paul Richter's man—old Sime Hathaway—to spade up the garden, and Seraphy put in some of the seeds to-day.

I asked her if we couldn't sell some of our garden produce when it came up but she said the good Lord knew who would buy it, because everybody had a garden here.

If I had more ambition I'd show these placid hill-hillies something. I'd start gardening on a big scale and send goods in to the city. Imagine Beth Hillyer's or Cora Churchill's faces if they received a box of nice fresh Brussels sprouts and celery with my love and the Sweethills stamp, and will they please forward remittance if more is desired!

No, I'm too languid and far too grasshopperish to start a market garden.

I'd rather read and dream . . .

Seraphy came in to-day with two disturbing pieces of news—or at least one that disturbed *me*.

She says Martha Bruce is taken very ill. The doctor thinks it's going to be a fever. I'm going down to-morrow and ask her to let me keep little Rob until she's well.

The second piece of gossip quite broke up Seraphy.

At first I couldn't get her to tell me beyond a long bitter reviling of Sweethills and its feminine inhabitants chiefly, but after a little she let a few fragments out—a word here and there—all the time, with two little scarlet spots of wrath in her old face.

I gathered that Sweethills is disturbed about me. She spoke of Mr. Vessey—the coat-tail man . . .

She thought possibly I oughtn't have been so friendly with Martha—most of all, she said

savagely, I oughtn't have had the hair the Lord gave me; I ought to have colored it purple-black like old Mr. Partridge's whiskers.

So it's come to this. I'm falling out of grace—and Sweethills thinks I'm "off-color"!

That explains something.

When I was going into the little library the other day I passed the splendid Mrs. Harmon coming out. She did not seem to see me.

She does not look like a woman of delicate moral fiber. I imagine it would take quite a little to shock her. I must be very shocking indeed! I tried to get Seraphy to tell me more but she grew reserved. It's the past though, not the present that's damning me, I find. The unknown part of me. I *have* noticed a certain reserve these last weeks about Sweethills—stray glances, that I felt were curious and that were quite likely condemnatory—and there have been no callers except Cynthia.

In church, too, I noticed—I've been there a second time—I was left to myself after serv-

ice. I fancied it was because I had already been made welcome, although I noticed many friendly groups chatting as I passed out. No one came and spoke to me. The greetings given were exceedingly dignified.

Perhaps Mr. Vessey has propounded his chorus-girl theory. I've met a number of chorus girls and they were lots better than I. Good-hearted, decent, upright, money-saving girls. But Sweethills wouldn't believe it.

If I were really a "chorus lady" I should probably be better able to palm myself off on people here—

I told Seraphy I didn't mind the rumors and that she was an old tramp, but the first part was a lie really. A year ago I suppose I'd have laughed and been disdainful about the opinions of this little two-by-four hill hamlet, but I'm different now. And there *is* something unpleasant about having even the meanest of creatures think ill of one. It shatters one's self-respect—and makes one's cheeks burn a little.

This afternoon I took a long ramble to think

it over;—then, as usual, I couldn't think at all—could only revel in the distractingly lovely country.

It's been a day I shall never forget—like velvet, and wine, and perfume, and jewels. A "piece out of God's quilt," Seraphy called it.

Only two days ago we had a scurry of snow and cold winds, and extra blankets on at night—but now!

There was a mist this morning that drifted up in soft feathery layers toward the sun, like one of those shadowy illusion curtains David Belasco used to like. It was nearly ten before the sun streamed through—and such a world as he found!

Lilacs all tasseled in white and purple; apple buds showing faintly pink; tulips—whole regiments, red and gold—and leaves, leaves, leaves, thousands on thousands, all unfurled overnight like clapping hands for joy. And under foot more golden dandelions than Rockefeller has dollars; and violets, whole purple lakes of them—oh, I can't write it all! How can I?

And how could I carry Seraphy's unpleasant gossip with me? I couldn't even bear a grudge against Sweethills.

I felt like laughing aloud. I *had* to smile at people I met.

I came around by the old Franklin house. A little silver-haired old lady was raking in the garden. No doubt the last of the Franklins!

She smiled at me pleasantly and we talked a little—about the flowers mostly. She told me the frosts had nipped the perennials the other night but her sweet peas were all saved because she had covered them with old carpet.

I never realized how vital an interest the life of one's flowers may make, until I saw the anxiety in her wrinkled face. I was genuinely thankful with her for the safety of the sweet peas.

She gave me a great spray of yellow forsythia to carry away. I used to see it in Central Park.

I wish she had been a little curious about me—or had asked me in. The house has a cer-

tain charm for me. Perhaps it's the name—I don't know. But it looks old and lovely and comfortable—as if it had great fireplaces and deep-curtained windows and easy chairs and big old-fashioned lamps to keep the dark out.

As I was leaving Paul Richter came along. He seems to “come along” so often on my rambles.

We went down the road together. Not a true road, but a lovely narrow leafy lane that joins the main road of the village.

In a curve of it there is a tiny spring beside a big sun-warmed stone with low bushes behind. We sat here a while.

I'm afraid I was very silly. . . .

We laughed a great deal at first and talked a lot of nonsense—but I would *not* let him *flirt*. He's versatile and attractive and I'm—well, lonely—but I've never meant to be serious. I'm done with that sort of thing forever— And I'm not taking Heiney Van Vorden's advice.

After a little I got to thinking of what



Seraphy had told me. It must have told on my spirit—or showed in my face.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“I was wondering if you knew Sweethills’ latest version of me,” I felt myself flushing a little, “if—if—what people are saying—” And I tried to tell him as lightly as I could.

“Sweethills is a bunch of fools—ignorant fools—always was,” he growled.

“Thank you—but don’t abuse your native heath. Sweethills is simply ‘from Missouri’ but I think it’s not a very kind place, after all—look at the way they treated poor little Martha Bruce.”

But he can’t get away from the Sweethills view-point. He winced as if I had spoken of something eminently improper.

“Oh—that girl,” he said hastily, “but there’s simply no comparison—”

“It must be because I’m alone,” I said, more to myself than to him.

It was a cue for him. He covered my hands with both of his impetuously.

“You needn’t be,” he said, his face very

close to mine; "I—let me tell you—won't you listen—we could stop all this—wait—"

I didn't wait. At his touch I sprang up and freed my hands.

"I can't wait—not a minute," I cried with pretended gaiety. "I'm late now—Seraphy'll scold me. Besides, I wasn't joking about it."

He looked at me with a dull red in his face.

"Neither was I," he said stiffly.

We were very quiet until we reached my door. I put out my hand.

"Come to see me soon—and bring the play again, neighbor."

I emphasized the last word and he took the rebuke.

"I'll come," he said, "only let me do that—" He spoke with genuine emotion and I was surprised. Yes—and disturbed. I don't want to make havoc for anybody. I've *tried* to show him it won't be any use.

I've about decided on my course. After all, it's the only one.

I'll stay here until my money's gone. Then when the laurel's out and the nests are full of young birds I'll slip away as I came.

Oh, I'll have to go back to the city. It's the only place I really know—where I can be of any use.

I'll get a place in one of the shops and take a tiny room, high up in one of those forlorn boarding-houses and sit on the stoop summer evenings when the street smells hot and thick and gasoliny, and I'll dream of Sweethills and the woods and the garden and the winds and the stars—and I'll sell ribbons or pins by day.

It won't be much of a solution, will it? I'll not be more useful there than in my other life—or here. After all, that's what counts, I believe—one's *use*. To the world, I mean.

Women seem to be of three kinds—and most of us belong to two. Those who fertilize the earth in the end; those who give to the world the fruit of some great gift or special labor, and those who *make* the world—who give it *life*.

I have no gift, no talent. And I have not

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handed on the torch of life—so I shall be just  
*earth*. A dust woman!

But at least I shall break no man's heart—  
nor take his money while I hate him.

If the worst comes to the worst I might sell  
my hair. It's a sort of curse, anyhow. . . .  
Larry used to love it.

## CHAPTER XVI

CONCERNED WITH FRENCH GOWNS AND LOYALTY TO  
FRIENDS AND A KISS THAT IS GRANTED BY REQUEST

"WHAT I'd like to know really is—are you always going to do these things?"

The remark coming apropos of nothing in particular, Cynthia Field looked up inquiringly at her companion. They had not spoken for several minutes—indeed Cynthia's cheeks were still pink with her exertion.

She knelt on a tussock of grass—a little islet in a deceptive and alluring sea of vivid water-pearled green. She held a grimy little knife in her fingers and a basket partly filled with watercress stood beside her. There was also something else in the picture—the figure of a carelessly dressed, red-haired young man, his eyes now with an absorbed attention on Cynthia's face under the big sun hat.

"I don't think I understand," she smiled;

"you don't mean the watercress, do you? I've only been at it fifteen minutes and I'll be finished directly."

"Oh—only as a symbol. What I mean is, are you going to stay here forever and dust Mrs. Stanford's parlors, and brew her tea, and take spots out of her clothes with gasoline, and darn her table-cloths?"

She threw back her head and laughed.

"You have a good memory—perhaps if you timed your calls differently, these domestic details wouldn't trouble you."

"It wouldn't make any difference. You'd be doing *something* for her. And that's what I mean. As a career are you going to find that entirely satisfying?"

"I hadn't thought of my career. Mrs. Stanford has always been so kind—and there's nothing I've ever been prepared for—what else could I do?"

"The answer to that is obvious, my dear Cynthy. But it really shouldn't be necessary for you to do anything. When I see you dig-

ging for cress here and think what and where you ought to be—the watering-places abroad—Nice, Monte Carlo—and gowns by Paquin—”

She made an amused grimace.

“It doesn’t sound attractive, and Monte Carlo sounds positively wicked. About the gowns, though—I’ve never seen a Paris gown, you know. But Rita Ashe has told me of some she’s seen. They must be lovely.”

“‘Rita Ashe.’ So you’ve got to that stage? And she tells you about French gowns?”

She looked up at him quickly.

“Why don’t you like her? You’ve never cared to meet her—” She stopped suddenly, her eyes growing wide. “You don’t mean these things—you must have heard—*you* don’t believe these dreadful things people say of her?”

“What things?” he asked.

“Oh,—*things*,” she said with a little tremor in her voice, “terrible unjust things—because she hasn’t gossiped with people about herself and told everything. Because she’s young and

pretty and all alone—and hasn't enough money to awe people. But I know—she's told me. There's nothing to make a mystery of. Only that she has *no one*—and just a little to live on—and—and a great deal of sadness has been in her life. And she wants the peace and quiet of Sweethills—”

“She—she told you that herself. The part about the sadness in her life and all that—”

Van Vorden studied his finger nails meditatively.

“She let me see it,” trembled Cynthia; “any one can see the shadow of it. And how any one could want anything else but to love her and comfort her—and these—these people”—she stopped breathlessly, a mist of unshed tears in her eyes—“why, they—they're demons.” She brought the word out with sudden furious emphasis.

Van Vorden laughed aloud.

“Encore. Encore, pretty Cynthy. But you mustn't swear you know, really—”

“Oh, but I could—when I think. It's Por-



ter Vessey—he's always so loathsome—he pats one on the cheek—or—or pinches one in the arm—or tries to 'salute' one in a f-fatherly fashion. Ugh!"

"Let *me* catch him patting or pinching," said Van Vorden quickly.

"Oh, everybody forgives him—they wouldn't dare do otherwise. He's so popular. And they believe whatever he says—"

"I believe," said Van Vorden musingly, "I understand your Politician and your Pink Lady have been quite active regarding yours truly. There's many a pretty little pot of tea brewed over me. And now Rita Ashe. You can't be at all susceptible to these village contagions, Cynthia,—why is it? You confess to loving Rita Ashe—but I can not—I dare not flatter myself it is sentiment in my own case—or else why refuse so often to let me come up?"

She was used to his chatter and did not answer directly. The warmth of her recent emotion still glowed in her face—her eyes were earnest and introspective.

"We seem like a heartless set of people—and some of us are. But lots of the others are only afraid to be different. I love Sweet-hills—I've never known any other place, but *I'm* not afraid. No one shall choose my friends—shall make me distrust and think ill of them—if—if," her soft voice trembled with feeling, "if they're true to me and let me see their good—"

"Could any one show you anything else than their good?" asked the man.

The innocence—the troubled sweetness of her face touched him strangely. He had again that earlier unwonted sensation of having come upon something wonderfully deep and pure and maternal.

Van Vorden's life held nothing that was especially humiliating to recall; but it also held nothing to stimulate pride. There was much of extravagance, of frivolity and wasted time in it. And if the man down there in Madison Avenue was right, there was one chance in a dozen to retrieve some of it.

He wished passionately now that he might

have the chance. He cared suddenly to be worthy of Cynthia's faith and belief—more than he had ever cared for anything in his idle good-natured existence.

If the one chance in twelve came his way—!

He looked down at his hands suddenly. They were different looking hands from those he had shown when he came six weeks before. They showed that he was putting on weight. They were losing their transparent frailness—growing fuller with a hint of blood in the finger-tips. And he was feeling better. He was not nearly so hoarse.

"You've been silent nearly two minutes"—said Cynthia, with a little teasing smile.

In the two minutes her own reflections had melted to a sunnier temper.

"Even a magpie thinks occasionally, dear child," he answered; "I was thinking what a brick and a dear you are. You don't mind a near-ghost telling you that?"

She frowned and with an impulsive gesture laid her hand on his.

"You're not to talk so—*Heiney*—you know I don't like it. You're ever so much better. You look ruddy and almost—*fat*. Mrs. Stanford's noticed it. If you stay you'll get well entirely. And if you do—"

He looked down at her with revealing eyes.

"If I do—" he threatened.

She flushed and spoke nervously.

"We've got a long way from French gowns—the ones Rita's seen. Don't you want to hear about them?"

"My dear—Cynthia—there's nothing I'd like so much as to *see* them—on you."

She laughed impersonally.

"Rita Ashe said the same thing. She told me about one I think I'd really love. Rose velvet—a brocade—with touches of silver lace. It makes me think of the deep pink buds of laurel with a spider-web across—I've seen them that way—beautiful! There was another—all different blues and grays like mist, and a green one like the leaves of narcissus with the dew on them—the same pale green—they let Rita try it on. It *would* suit her you know, with

her golden hair. Pale green, clinging satin and pearls—”

“By jove! I remember! It made me sit up and notice. Studded all over with tiny pearls—”

Cynthia’s knife slipped from her fingers down among the tangled cress.

“How do *you* know?” She looked up at him wide-eyed.

Van Vorden kicked himself mentally.

“I don’t know—I didn’t. It was an idle guess. They were the rage in New York last winter. Saw ’em everywhere—subway, L-trains, taxis. Women were literally crazy about those pearl-spangled duds. Worst-looking mess, some of ’em. Don’t you want me to help with the cress?”

“I have enough. You don’t know it anyhow from chickweed.”

She had retrieved her knife, but doubt still wrinkled her brow.

“Sometimes I think—” she began.

“You mustn’t,” he said briskly. “It’s beastly for the face. First thing you know

you'll be wearing thick glasses, and growing a mustache. Come Brains—farewell Beauty. *Voilà!* Do you hear that robin calling its mate? Would you like to hear me give an imitation? I can do it capitally."

"That was a squirrel," said Cynthia dryly. "It's the little things," she said in a minute, "just the hints. I can't help trying to put things together—and then there's what Rita said about *you*."

"What did she say?" Heiney wheeled to her quickly.

"She said you were quite the 'best-hearted, straightest thing ever.' How did *she* know?"

"You might ask her. Perhaps my innocent and open face tells her."

"I did ask her. And she evaded. *She evaded.*"

She spoke the words as if for the first time a flaw appeared in her idol. Heiney turned to her quickly.

"You mustn't *doubt*, Cynthia. Don't begin now."

"I'm not. But sometimes—I *think* you've known each other before."

She spoke like one stepping violently on sacred ground. And Van Vorden smiled in spite of himself.

"And suppose we had. Come—I'll tell you something. We did know each other. We do know each other. Does that satisfy you?"

"Then why—why—" she began.

"You mustn't question and you mustn't doubt. You'll do her good. And she *is* worth while. I've always thought so. Just now she's come some bally cropper or other—you women get these mental streaks—that's made her turn hermit and hide in the woods. Come! Don't look so scared. There's nothing wrong. She's an all-right girl—the 'straightest ever.' And some day she'll tell you everything."

But Cynthia still looked disturbed.

"Oh, it wouldn't make any difference with me—*what* she was. I *know*. And she's my friend. But I was thinking"—her eyes rested on his doubtfully—"about your both being here—it wasn't—it couldn't—"

"Not in the least. I'm not Rita's 'follower,' as I believe your Vessey person intimates. One of these days Richter's going to kill that chap."

"I think—Paul loves her," said Cynthia in a low voice.

"Oh—Paul loves everybody," said Van Vorden.

"But this is different. I've seen him—with others. He's never been serious until now."

"Won't do him a red cent's worth of good," said Heiney cheerfully.

"How do you know?" she flashed. "A woman doesn't tell those things—some women. He's very handsome and he makes a fine impression."

"And he makes love divinely. I've watched him. Cynthia"—he looked at her shrewdly—"has he ever made love to you?"

"What nonsense! I must go now—we'd better start back. Look where you're going. You're stepping into that water. You'll get your feet wet. You *did* get them wet—the *right* foot—you did."



“You’re a shrew, Cynthy. If he *hasn’t*, the reason is obvious. You’re about as impressionable to love-making as *lignum-vitæ*. Don’t I know?”

“Why,” she laughed, “have *you* tried to make love?”

He did not answer. And an uncomfortable constraint fell between them. With keen distress she wished she had not asked the silly question. It was like a taunt to a man in his condition. She half-feared to look at him.

When she did she found his eyes on hers with a curious intent expression. He looked suddenly frailer, paler even than on his first day—impalpably different from his usual ugly-attractive self.

He towered suddenly above her like a man under some curious emotional strain that increased his physical inches.

They had risen to go, and stood close together under the beeches that grew by the stream. It was dim already with a tender dusk here under the trees and only the mellow afterglow of a mountain sunset down-stream.

He looked down at her a moment before he spoke.

"Cynthia," he said, "you care for me about as much as you do for a paper of pins. And that's as it should be. I'm—out of the running. But—would you care—just once—if I kissed you?"

For some odd reason she could not speak. Her heart felt curiously muffled; her eyes full of unshed tears.

She lifted her face to his as a child might, and he stooped and kissed her cheek reverently.

"You're a nice little girl," he said, "a *nice* little girl."

She let him take her basket from her hand and they turned homeward silently.

Cynthia could not have told why, but words would have been impossible to her, and she was glad of the dusk that hid the tears that lay on her eyelashes.

## CHAPTER XVII

WHEREIN A STRUGGLE AGAINST HEAVY ODDS IS TAKING  
PLACE, AND A YOUNG MAN BARES HIS HEART  
TO NO AVAIL

THERE was a mighty battle going on in the little green house at the end of the town.

Outside, the world was clad for dawning summer—the garden was full of it, but there was no summer across its threshold. It had become a place of waiting—a place where a hushed presence kept vigil, thrust back only by the potent force of a passionate mother-love.

The battle went on in one of the upper chambers—where a little mother fought gallantly for life against cruel odds; where sometimes, questioning, to her door came a little, forlorn, frightened child, to sob or whisper her name and go unheeded.

There was scant place for him now in the

hush of the house, where people stepped softly, where the doctor came and went, where the odors of drugs and medicines persisted.

But sometimes some one took him into the garden and showed him the fat velvety bees among the tall iris blossoms—or let him watch the white lilacs knocking gently on his mother's window.

"She doesn't hear," he would mourn and the "some one," Cynthia Field perhaps, or Rita Ashe, or even that stern neighbor of yesterday, old Honey Hyslop, would catch him and hold him close for a little as though he had stumbled on some pathetic secret.

And in truth he had. For it was a losing battle the little dressmaker fought, and a world that had hardened its heart to her yesterday, suddenly yearned in pity over her little "love-child," and kissed him with reddened eyelids.

There were many to be kind now—good narrow souls genuinely stirred to pure humanity, but he clung most passionately to his "pitty lady" and to Cynthia whom he had known and loved next to his mother.

It was Cynthia's neck he wept on oftenest for Cynthia had a way of being where comfort was needed. Her soft breast and shoulders, like the green lap of Mother Earth, seemed made for tear-wet faces to hide in.

But other eyes watched him oftenest—with a passionate yearning and hopeless wishing that made an endless heartache. They belonged to the Spring Lady, and the key to her hopelessness lay in her fast waning funds.

"If I could only take him when it's over," she thought, as she watched the little figure trudging after kind Seraphy's unlovely shape, "take him and *keep* him."

And all the pent force of stifled maternity rose in her heart. It would all have to end so shortly. Seraphy had been right! "When the laurel bloomed"—She had counted her weeks correctly. There was enough money left now for one week and already on the mountains the laurel was rosy with small buds.

A strange pain possessed the girl. In all her life she had never wanted anything so much

as this little nook. Just to stay here—living quietly, simply, with the little old dream house, and the riotous garden and Seraphy's quaint chatter and faithful hands, and the little Rob to play with—and the day-dreams that flocked so vividly here. It was a sweet dolce far niente she had fallen into and in seven short days it must end.

After that there would be the city again and her two choices. She might try to go back if she willed—to the old conventional round of luxuries, the old habits—or the new struggle she had decreed,—the never-before-known battle for merely bread and butter. Before its horrors her unequipped spirit quailed, yet she felt an even greater horror of that other life. It would be like stale lees of wine after mountain spring water. Anything was better than that.

But a great lump formed in her throat and she went to her garden for comfort.

She found Paul Richter at her gate, as she so often found him lately.

"I've brought you the *Pippa* you wanted,"

he began, putting the thin little book into her hand.

"Thank you," she said.

Just for a moment she felt a keen dislike for him. He had a way of appearing so often like a friendly genie with these "gifts of the spirit" as he called them. And so often when she would have preferred her own mood for company! Still it was kind of him—even if interestedly kind, and she asked him to sit in the little vine-covered porch as usual.

"I'm alone to-day," he said; "Van Vorden's gone down to New York to see his doctor. He seems to have improved considerably."

"It seems to me that any one would improve here," she said.

"It's done the almost impossible. It's made a difference even with you. Like painting the lily," he said with his ardent eyes on her.

She evaded them.

"It seems like a place where every one ought to be well and strong. With all the sun and the flowers and the sweet air—like a place too lovely for death to come to."

"Oh, but death is lovely too—it is only completing the cycle. I don't know that anything could be lovelier. To live; to die—to go back to the great mother; to live again in this"—he waved his hand toward the blossoming garden—"‘kiss of lips or kiss of bee’—what difference?"

She shook her head.

"I've felt that way sometimes—but there is a death that is infinitely cruel. To leave behind a loved helpless thing—I was thinking of poor Martha Bruce. Perhaps you've heard she isn't going to get well?"

He was silent a moment.

"Perhaps," he said presently, "she will be much happier. She was—rather odd—for her type of woman."

"You knew her of course?"

"A little," he said shortly.

"There's the boy. It's going to mean a long heartache for him."

"It will be better for him—in the end. She—I've heard people say that she always refused any offer of financial help. There'll be



a chance for him now—for advantages, education."

"But not love. Cynthia loves him, but how could she keep him? And I—I couldn't take him to the city."

He looked at her with startled eyes.

"'The city'! Do you mean— You're not going away."

It cost her something to smile.

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked with brave lightness; "I'm the 'Spring Lady'—and spring is over."

"You—you—but I thought," he began, "but I—we—you've been here only a little while."

"Almost two months," she said, fighting to keep the quiver from her voice. "I—I'm fond of Sweethills—but there are other things for me to do. I must go back."

"But you're going to tell me where," he cried; "there's—I'd follow you anywhere—no, listen, please—I won't go on unless you wish. You've kept me at arm's length from the beginning. But you will tell me *this*. After all the hours we've had—the poems and read-

ing—you're not going to run away from me?"

At the genuine misery in his face, her heart softened.

"There's really no reason why I should tell you, Mr. Richter. But if you wish—I'm going back where I came from. You've known all along, New York."

He leaned forward, a sudden eagerness in his face.

"Yes—I *knew*. It's your setting. What platinum is to the diamond. New York!" he cried; "it's like a wine—like a drink of the gods. It's life itself. There's room in it for everything. When my play's finished—oh, I'll see you in New York! And it won't be as it is here. You've forced me to be your neighbor here—your neighbor! Faugh! I'll be your 'hunter at the gate,' Rita—listen. Let me call you so this once. I thought I knew love before—oh, I'll be honest; but I never even crossed the threshold. *Now*," he seized her hand suddenly, "no, no—not yet. Unless you wish. Oh, but you shall wish—sometime,

soon," his voice trembled, "oh, girl—my girl with daffodil hair—I'll teach you what love means. You're like a fair white vestal—a neophyte in love. But *there*—in the city we'll learn life together— Love! I could teach you a thousand forms of love."

He was an ardent handsome boy, now, his warm flushed face so close to hers.

The girl released her hand gravely.

"No doubt," she said, "you could teach me much of—love. But I shall not listen. I must not. Oh, I've let men make love to me before—it was amusing for me—but not now. No, don't look so hurt. Yours does not amuse me. I'm only sorry—sorry. I haven't been honest, you see—but I'm going to be now. I'm going to tell you why you must go now—and not come back. And why you must forget me. I've been afraid of this—of your caring for me. You see—" she broke off suddenly, then hurdled to the end. "You see, I'm married."

It took him a minute to realize her words.

"Married," he repeated in a colorless voice.

"Yes," she nodded. She did not like to look at his face. She knew now that he really had cared—that all his sensuous nature had been deeply aroused by her. "I'm so sorry," she repeated.

"Married," he said again. The color was coming to his stricken face now. "Then why—but that doesn't mean—"

"Oh, but it does," she stopped him quickly.

He rose and faced her now, his face working with a sudden unlovely passion.

"Then you've played with me—*played* with me. You've let me believe—"

"Nothing," she finished crisply; "your beliefs did not concern me, Mr. Richter. I—I had my reasons for coming here as I did. I accepted you as my neighbor, only."

"But I'm—why, God, I loved you. You let me come. You knew—you must have known. Out of all the world, you're the only woman I've ever loved," his voice rose almost shrill with emotion.

"Hush!" she said, "you must go now—I can't listen."

"Why not? You've played with me. Why shouldn't you know what you've done. Does it mean nothing to you to wear a man's devotion like a glove and toss it aside when it cumbars you?"

She would have liked to smile but she frowned instead.

"I don't think I've really done all that, Mr. Richter—I've not meant to, at any rate. I can only say I'm sorry—"

He stared at her unseeingly.

"And I loved you," he said tragically—

Suddenly he turned on his heel without another word and left her.

There was something both pathetic and comical to her in the sudden lowered carriage of his confident young head.

"It isn't as if I had really done all that," she said half resentfully, "but I'm sorry. I wonder, though, if Heiney Van Vorden isn't right—and he *needed* it. I wonder if he's not made more than one heart ache."

## CHAPTER XVIII

SHOWING THE CONDUCT OF A GENTLEMAN WHO CAN NOT  
TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER

THE windows of Richter's living-room were open wide to the night.

It was a dark night—one of those velvety warm nights in early June, that, in the mountains, precede a period of rain and cold. There was neither moon nor star outside.

The garden outside lay black, mysterious, almost exotic in suggestion, with soft scents rising from the warm verdure that drifted into the room itself. There was no light inside—only a faint glow from a hallway beyond, that lighted palely the delicate curl of smoke from Richter's cigarette as he lounged in the window.

He had been playing earlier, but his mood now was too much in accord with the somberness of the night.

And into the room and into Richter's mood suddenly came Van Vorden freshly returned from New York.

Had there been lights he must have put them out of countenance by the radiance of his expression. But Richter saw neither his face, nor for a moment, him.

"Wake, dreamer," said his friend, and some unusual quality in his voice made the other turn to him.

"You've had good news?" he asked.

"I've traveled back—*light*," said Van Vorden, "hardly a symptom in my grip."

"Good," said Paul mechanically, "you'll be going back soon?"

Van Vorden was silent a minute.

"If any one had told me a year ago that I'd thank God for just the chance to live in *any* place—a place like this even—" he stopped expressively. "No," he said, "I shan't go back. I'm only a ticket-of-leave man at best. I've got to stay out of the city—for years. But I shan't mind—if I can stay on top of the old earth."

"It's Cynthia, of course," said Richter.

"It's—Cynthia," said Van Vorden.

And neither spoke for a little. Then with a conscious effort Richter roused himself.

"You're a good old boy, Van Vorden—I hope it will be well for you."

In spite of himself he accented the last word.

"Then—it's not going well for *you?*" asked Van Vorden.

Richter got up and paced the floor before he spoke.

"Van Vorden," he said, "I'm going away—to Europe. Will you stay on and look after things—the grounds and Sime. I'll be back in the autumn probably—but I've got to get away now—no, don't answer offhand. You've got to stay here—and we've been pals. You'll do me all kinds of a favor by it—you asked if it was going well with me—it's going like hell. I—I've got to go." His voice trembled, broke boyishly.

"By jove! You *are* hard hit. I knew though, it wouldn't do at all—"

"You *knew*—" said Richter sharply.



"Guessed—rather," said Van Vorden. "I haven't been presented to the lady, but I've always fancied she'd turn you down. I've rather thought she's been keeping up an incog.; am I right?"

"She's going away," said Richter harshly, as though that sufficed. "I—I shouldn't care to stay on—for a while. I—you think it over—what I said. I'm going out for a walk now."

He left the room abruptly and a minute later Heiney heard his step on the graveled walk, outside the gate.

Contrary to custom the Ford house showed no light to-night. The mysterious, alluring quality of the night brooded close over it—hid it like a pall—in its thick tangle of shrubbery.

It lent color to a thousand imaginings.

The garden, vital with life, might conceal anything, any one in the deep shadow of tree or shrub.

As he came up, Paul fancied first that some

one sat in the porch, but it was empty. A faint splash of gray under the elm tree was equally deceptive. Surely the house with its eyes so tightly closed was empty, but in spite of this he sounded the old knocker. Only its clangor within and the shriek of a frightened owl in the vine replied.

Then he heard some one coming up the road and he went out into it. At first he thought it was Seraphy Bassett, under the moonless sky, but a minute later the dark irregular shape grew recognizable and his pulses throbbed with the realization.

He had not known before why he came, but he knew now.

He started forward so suddenly that Rita Ashe cried out.

"It's I—Richter," he said a little hoarsely.

"You—frightened me," she faltered, "it's so dark—I wasn't expecting—"

She peered up at him, a vague discomfort stirring in her. Some indefinable quality in his voice, his presence—perhaps the suggestive influence of the night—alarmed her faintly.

"I—will you come in? I shall not let you stay long—" she began.

She wondered why he had sought her. Was he ashamed of his childishness of the afternoon?

"I—won't come in. It's a night for outdoors. Walk with me a little, won't you? I want to tell you something—"

He tried to speak coolly but it took all his self-control.

The night was making its appeal to him. All that was sensuous, emotional in him responded. The fluid poetry of his nature thrilled to its soft oppressive warmth.

But his words disarmed her. She hesitated, then said, "I'm very tired—but I'll walk a few steps."

They turned up the road into the shadowy night together.

"I wanted you to know—I'm going away—to Europe."

"Europe," she said; then with a touch of nervousness: "it will be a wonderful experience—"

I've always wanted to go—I hope to some day.”

He swung round to her suddenly.

“And you will not go alone? Not after what you said to-day. *He* will go with you.”

“Must you speak of that,” she cried; “don’t let us speak of it. Let it stand closed—forgot.”

“Forgot.” He bit his lips suddenly.

“It is best,” she said quietly.

“Best for him,” he said savagely, “best for you—for him. But what about me? What have you done to *me*?”

“I am not responsible for you,” she answered gravely; “if I have in any way misled you—oh, I tried not to.” In spite of herself her voice trembled. “You would not understand—you *wanted* to deceive yourself, Mr. Richter—but for any share of mine, I am deeply regretful.”

“No woman,” he cried, “has ever played with me before—you let me love you. You knew it—there’s no use denying—and *now!* I—I

—why don't you play the game—Rita, there's no part of me doesn't worship you. In your own heart you must know it—I could teach you—if you came away with me—love's the only life worth while—for both of us—”

He caught her arm impetuously and she shook herself free with disdain.

“You are insane,” she said, “unstrung. I must turn back—your opening up the subject is useless—I would be your friend, but it is impossible. Besides, you're really a very insulting boy—if you realize what you're saying.”

“‘A boy!’” he cried. “Then I'll play the man's part—you shan't throw me aside like this—stop—I'll make you listen—you *shall*—Do you think you can come here and masquerade like this—and not pay?”

She turned and would have passed him haughtily but he stopped her with outstretched arms.

“Let me by,” she said.

But he had thrown restraint to the winds. All that was erotic, bestial in him beneath his superficial culture rose to ascendancy.

He pressed suddenly close to her.

"Rita—love me a little—oh, but you shall—" he said thickly.

Before she could move or speak he had seized her in his arms, and held her close.

For one instant, unguarded, she was still. Her soft hair brushed his forehead and maddened him. His lips, buried in the strands, kissed them. Then she struck at him furiously and broke free of his embrace.

"Is that your 'man's part'?" she panted. "I call it—a coward's part. Do you think you can ride rough-shod over a woman's will—I—Some day—you will learn—what it is to be a man—now, you're just a spoiled child—"

Contemptuously, she turned and left him. At her gate she found Seraphy waiting for her.

"Ain't there some one else? I thought I heard somebody speakin'— You ain't b'en talkin' to some one? And you're all out o' breath." Seraphy peered at her suspiciously.

"I walked—too fast. I should have waited for you—I do very foolish things—sometimes,

Seraphy—I shall never be a wise—sensible person—”

“You’re the way the Lord made you. Nice to look at—and to have folks love you. They’s enough sensible *homely* people runnin’ loose now—” Seraphy was busy unlocking the door. She did not see the other’s sudden weary pose—and the darkness hid the thick mist of tears in her eyes.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE LAST MEDITATION AND THE SONG OF PIPPA

#### THE JOURNAL:

I think this is the last time I shall write in my book. I am coming to the end of things—

The doctor tells us Martha will not live beyond to-morrow. I shall wait until—*then*.

Then I must go. . . .

But first I shall have to tell Seraphy. I have not told her. It will be hard. I like Seraphy.

My head aches to-night. I can not write very well. I wish Martha did not have to die. I do not understand—but there is so much I do not. I found these lines in the *Pippa* book to-day.

*"The year's at the spring,  
And day's at the morn,  
Morning's at seven;  
The hill-side's dew-pearl'd;*



*The lark's on the wing;  
The snail's on the thorn;  
God's in His Heaven—  
All's right with the world!*

How I wish I could believe it—the last two lines.

I'm so tired. . . .

I do not want to go away. I have been so happy these two months. And all's not right with *my* world. There's *Larry*. If I *did* go back, I should be afraid—that he might not forgive me. I dare not try it. And he wouldn't understand how I've changed. I couldn't go back to him.

I wish I knew what it meant. Perhaps it's fear.

To-day I fainted for the second time this week. Seraphy put me to bed herself. My kind old Seraphy! She sat and watched me the longest time. Perhaps—but no, she doesn't dream I'm going away—but I could *feel* her watching me.

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It's strange that I should be ill—I've seemed so strong and looked so well lately.

And I've never been the fainting kind. . . . Last night I had the strangest fancy—I thought perhaps—it might be—I wonder how—what nonsense I am writing— No, no, that will never be mine to know—

I've lied about one thing in writing here. And I've known it all the time—in my heart. I *love* Larry. I shall love him always.

## CHAPTER XX

WHEREIN A REVELATION IS MADE AND A BATTLE ENDED

THE little dressmaker died at sunset.

At the last there were two watchers with her—Seraphy and the Spring Lady—and they brought the baby to her and lifted him for her to kiss.

The frail wasted face lighted with a mighty mother passion.

“So beautiful,” she whispered, and Seraphy laid his warm little hand on the cold cheek. “God”—she said faintly, “God—keep—”

And suddenly she smiled a brave confident little smile as of one who is assured an answer, and closed her eyes.

The little child touched her mouth with his fingers.

“Mamma happy!” he said.

It was two hours before this that Martha told them.

At first they thought her mind wandered, but presently they knew that it had strayed only back through the years to her girlhood. There were sentences—fragments of sentences—incoherent at times—disconnected—but, together, links in the tangled chain of her unhappy life.

They told first—mere hints—of the girl, shy, inexperienced, wistful, unworldly, snug in the shelter of her little shabby home. They told of her first great loneliness—the dead parents—the kindly friends—the new life to be faced alone.

They told of terror, too—terror of the world—of just the unknown— But there was most of all loneliness—heartbreaking loneliness—long hours of it—her shy inability to mingle with the other young people—and the long grind of a none too congenial work.

She wanted to be something else than a dressmaker. Her God had given her the precious soul of the creator—and though she worked it out with shears and needle she wanted another medium. She wanted to make

beautiful things for the world—to give it a message—to love and live for beauty.

Now that her hour was closing in upon her she knew no fear in her revelation—no shyness kept her mute. She spoke simply and naturally of her deep longing.

There had seemed no way to help her—no way to escape the needle and shears until—

It was here that she spoke of the afternoons in the mountains—long Sunday afternoons in the stillness of the wood. She had been brought up a Methodist, but somewhere she had strayed upon an old Episcopal prayer-book. She took it with her to the woods at first, to read and reread its gracious beauty of phrase. Presently there was no need. She was alone no longer.

He had come upon her quite suddenly at first—so suddenly that like a timid fawn she had started to run.

He had never spoken to her before, but now he followed, and half-coaxing, half-jesting, had begged to look at her book. “He had a book

in his pocket—poetry. I loved books always.”

She was silent, introspective for a moment.

“He read beautifully—it was like water to a thirsting man. I knew—so little. Then he said he would be there next Sunday. He had many lovely things he would read me.”

She sighed and smiled a little.

There had been many “next Sundays.” All through the long dreaming summer they had met—to the very last day that the cricket sang and the trees were green. After that he went away.

At first they had merely read together and he had given her a new world—brought to her famishing heart a feast. He taught her things—the mountain boundaries had dropped away before her eyes, revealing mighty world pictures, cities, rivers, dim half-forgotten countries, the legends of centuries—

She had opened her heart to him as a flower does to the sun—had told him her dreams and ambitions.

"No man had ever talked to me before—I loved him—*loved* him."

One afternoon he kissed her. One drowsy August Sunday. He had been reading the *Lotus Eaters* to her—

She had floated away on a dream—a world-old dream of nature's making, that knows no morals nor standards.

"I loved him," she whispered, "but—I remembered it all afterward—he never spoke of love—nor marrying. It was just I. Perhaps I fooled myself—there were the foreign countries he spoke of going to. Sometimes I dreamed of being with him there—I—I—it was *all* like a dream till afterward. Afterward when I was waiting I saw it all clearly. It meant nothing to him—just—what they call in books—a passing romance—but with me it was—different."

All through the summer they had met unknown to any one—and the girl had clung to her happiness with passionate fervor.

Then the end came. He went away—without speaking. And she had said nothing—

through the months when bitterness had filled her cup and heart-breaking realization had been hers, she had not spoken, nor named him.

"But *he knew*—"

He came once and offered her money. She had refused all aid.

"I wasn't angry—why should I have been—he had not tried to deceive me—it was all myself, what I wanted to believe—and I had Robbie."

They got some conception here of what the child had meant to her. How much heart-ache she had wept away on his little breast—

"I was afraid *always*—he would take him from me—it seemed to me every one should want him—and *his father!* He never troubled me—but now—I've asked God to open Paul Richter's eyes—it's his little son—his own boy with his own blue eyes—"

The Spring Lady sat close by her and held the wasted needle-pricked fingers.

There was a wind stirring among the flowers outside—it swayed the window-curtains lightly, shook the old door-latch



gently— The house was old and full of faint creakings and tiny noises.

Because of this neither the dying woman nor her watchers realized the presence of another, just outside the partly opened door.

The white-clad, white-faced girl stood very still. It was only when Martha sank gray and spent on her pillow that she moved. Then she set her little basket on the hall stand noiselessly and went outside.

Her face was drenched with pallor, stricken, yet stern in expression.

By the gate an old bench stood guarded by tall day lilies. She sat down here like a figure from which youth had suddenly departed. Her face looked older, tragic, disillusioned.

She sat without moving for a long time, like a symbol of devastating grief, too terrible for tears. The wind brought her flower perfumes, the scent of the pine forest, the sweetness of blossoming fruit trees, but she was conscious of nothing.

After a while—minutes or hours she knew not which—Seraphy Bassett leaned out from

Martha's windows and closed the shutters softly. A minute later Rita Ashe, pale and grave, came out on the porch with the child in her arms.

At this the girl rose from her seat and went out through the gate.

She looked straight ahead as she went and she walked like one with a mighty purpose. People seeing her go down the street from Martha's cottage said in low voices, "The Bruce girl's dead."

They were right. But there was more than this message in Cynthia's manner.

It seemed to her that all the age-old immemorial woman-grief the world has known had surged to her throat. She was become the epitome of the woman-tragedy—the tragedy of the heart that builds high on a foundation of sand.

## CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH A YOUNG GENTLEMAN IS TOLD THE PLAIN  
TRUTH, AND ANOTHER DEFENDS HIS LADY, WHO  
IS NOT UNGRATEFUL

CYNTHIA had no trouble to find Paul. In an upland pasture she knew he was superintending the clearing out of brush and stone by Sime Hathaway and several others. She could see them at work from the end of the village street. She climbed to where they worked, with steady feet.

Paul saw her coming and came to meet her.

Even before she spoke he read some hostile tidings in her eyes, for his face sobered. For a moment she could not utter a word, then she said quietly, "I came to find you—to tell you. Martha is dead."

He started and whitened under his tan. There was the briefest pause, then,—

"You *know*," he said in a low voice. He

turned away his eyes and looked off at the mountains.

Still Cynthia could not speak. It seemed to her suddenly the silence fairly sang; that all the teeming insect life about them choired with strident frenzy; that even the leaves and the plants murmured, and the very heat waves clamored, and beat against one another. The earth sent up a thousand noises, tiny yet mighty against the breathless pause that had fallen between the two.

"She told at *last*," he said; "I've always expected it." Then he turned with a swift angry gesture to Cynthia. "What do they want me to do?" he cried passionately.

"What are you going to do?" She found voice at last. "What have you tried to do?"

"I've done my duty. What any man would do. She might have had an allowance for her child."

"Your child." There was a hard unwonted note in Cynthia's voice that made him look at her uneasily.

"Look here," he said sullenly, "this isn't a

pretty subject for you and me to discuss. I'll do my duty—financially, if that's what you ask. But you—why, Cynthia, you've been my friend. Can't you—you don't know the world—the man's world. You see the sentimental side. Why should *you* bother?"

She stopped him suddenly.

"That's what I want you to know," she said steadily; "why I, a girl, came first to tell you. It was not only to tell you that the boy—your son—needs you now, has only you—nor to tell you that we know—what you *are*"—he winced—"but to tell you something else, as well."

She hesitated a moment, and for a tiny space the hardness passed from her young face and left her wistful and sweet, almost timid-looking, then her eyes darkened and her face paled.

"I came to tell you because it has a special meaning to me—to know you; find you out. You see—it's hardest on me, of all—because—I *loved you so.*"

The man opposite put out his hand, impulsively, without volition.

"Don't speak," cried Cynthia harshly, "don't misunderstand me— It's this I came to talk about, to let you know. This thing that was, but isn't *now*. Oh, Paul, it meant so much to me—loving you. You'll never know. It wasn't an *expecting* love—it was just enough for me to *feel*— You never guessed—why should you? But it was always so. When I was a little thing, and you a great strong boy in the upper classes—it was there then—when you carried my books, or brought me an apple. The cleverest, handsomest boy in the world, I thought you—I knew then I loved you—it was like breathing, as simple as that. And afterward, when we were growing up in the village life—I watched always when you came and went. You never gave me a thought—I didn't expect it, but it was there, all the time. The most wonderful secret in my life—just to love *you*. Because you were fine and strong and true and thought lovely noble thoughts and tried to write them. It made me happy. I—I used to watch your light at night and pray about you." Her

young face was neither soft nor pretty now, but the man did not see. His face was livid, his eyes unseeingly still on the hills. "And you *fooled* me," she cried tensely, "fooled all of us—but most of all, *me*. That's why I came to tell you. For you killed something of mine—something that was lovely and precious and worth while—to me. It isn't only Martha who died to-day—it's some one else that was dearer to me than life. Some one who had nothing despicable nor base about him. This is what I wanted you to know—oh, Paul, if you could have saved me that—to—to know that you could be—ignoble and unworthy,"—her voice broke, faltered.

Richter's face was ashen. He moistened his dry lips.

"My God," he whispered.

"It isn't that a man may not sin," Cynthia's young voice rang with judgment; "one might even forgive *that*. But to break a life—and to hide by safe and snug. To let a light go out, after all the bitterness, and not take the consequences—to conceal what one's done, to

skulk under a mask—that's why I *loathe* you now," her voice was filled with quiet scorn, "why you are contemptible—"

"God," he whispered again. For under the lash of her blazing eyes and words, he knew himself naked of any shred of illusion—and a soul that has worn the cloak of illusion even to itself can not bear the first revelation of its nakedness. Cynthia waited a moment.

"That's all," she said wearily, "all that I came to say. For the rest—you must do what is best. What is best," she repeated in a lifeless voice; then, white and silent, she left him to his seeming contemplation of the distant mountains.

There was a flat rock along the water's edge, screened high by cattails and tall marsh-grass. In her childhood Cynthia had played on it often.

She sought it now. At first, being young, the despair in her heart forbade all tears, but presently they came and she wept long and passionately, lying prone on the warm



stone. And some of her bitterness was purged away, though none of her heartache—for a nature essentially sweet can not long suffer the corroding acid of rancor. And presently, when she sat up, swollen-eyed and heavy, it was to form a resolve that somehow in some way, she would pick up the wrecked fragments and build her life afresh.

“To help others,” she vowed. She had always been a “helping hand” but she meant now to live for this. And suddenly she had her first literal opportunity. For Van Vorden came down to the water’s edge.

His clothes were torn and his face was bleeding from a split lip and an ugly cut above the temple, and one of his eyes was closing fast; and Cynthia, forgetting her own eyes, started up.

“What has happened?” she asked breathlessly.

And Van Vorden, whose wind was not in good order, told her as he knelt by the water and clumsily tried to bathe the blood from his mouth.

"I've been fighting," he managed to say; "I've been trimming your pillar of respectability—the Vessey person."

"You've been fighting with Porter Vessey!" cried Cynthia, scandalized.

"Licked him, too," he bragged.

"But—in your condition? And he's so big. How in the world did it ever begin?"

"Oh, I began it," said Heiney; "I knocked him down, to be exact. He—made a remark to me I didn't like—concerning a party I admire. I've owed him a few scores for some time—and I tucked in a few for Rita Ashe. I had my hands full, too—being off form. He's a meaty beggar—with a rush like a bull."

"He could have killed you," she cried. She had taken his dripping handkerchief and was expertly bathing his wounds and bruises.

"To tell you the truth, he did. He had me licked in about five minutes. But, if you've ever noticed my hair?—I just hung on and let him batter away. It made him mad. He knew he had me and he couldn't see why I wouldn't own up. He ran amuck after a

while—and I got him. I feel like jelly—he’s mangled me some—but you ought to see *him*, Cynthia.”

“You foolish thing,” she cried; “now I’ll have to bind you up and get you well again. I *know* why you struck him. It was I, wasn’t it?”

“Yes—you,” he said; then the effort to speak made him faint and he leaned against her, things swimming before his eyes.

She ministered to him as only her deft experienced hands could, and presently the blackness and mist left him and he looked up at her and saw her eyes.

“You were crying when I came,” he said; “why did you cry, Cynthia?”

She told him simply, unaffectedly. He was very still when she had finished.

“I’ve felt it was that way, all along. And now you know your idol has feet of clay. The clay hangs to all of us, Cynthia. Time will help you.”

“Perhaps,” she said, but her tone denied it.

“God knows I hope so. Cynthia, if I could

only tell you how much I'd give to spare you the slightest heartache. How much even to give you back this precious Richter cured of his fault—"

"You're a good friend," she said.

"No," he said, "I'm not. I lied in the beginning. I said I wanted your interest—friendly interest, but I didn't—I wanted your love—and that's madness, isn't it?" He had taken her hand and she made a sudden move to withdraw it. "Wait, Cynthia," he said, "wait just a little—Cynthia, I can love as I fight. I don't know when I'm beaten. Listen, dear—you don't believe it, but time will make all the difference—it will heal anything. That's what I'm going to wait for. My doctor tells me I'm going to pull through—with care. And then—don't look at me, Cynthia, I'm a hideous mess—I know it's not the time nor the place when you're still crushed by this thing—but, dear—this is all I ask now: if you feel that it will never make any difference to you—that you want me to go away and let you forget all about me—that

there never may be a time when I'll be necessary to you—mind, it binds you to nothing—if you feel this—then—take your hand away. I'll know then."

She began to cry softly.

"How can I tell? How can I know? Oh, Heiney, don't desert me now. Life seems wretched enough—but I need you. Perhaps—oh, I don't know what will come. But if you care to wait—you may keep my hand, Heiney."

She let him hold it and they sat very quiet. After a little he raised it to his broken lips and kissed it.

She made no sign. Her thoughts were still wrapped in shadow—grieving over the broken fragments of her ideal. But Heiney's heart was full of peace.

When Cynthia left, Paul Richter did not move for a long time. It was only when Sime Hathaway shouted at him that he roused to make a gesture of dismissal and stride down the hillside.

He walked like a man on whom a great chastening had fallen, like one to whom years had suddenly been added. There was no arrogance to his shoulders, no lift to his head.

There had come to him a sudden clarity of vision, in which he saw life's relations for the first time as they really are—and himself as well.

It had taken Cynthia's candid confession and stinging scorn to rouse it, and it had been effective. There was good blood in him; deep lying, latent, beneath his superficial selfishness, the true manhood of admirable forbears.

This was aroused now. He was no longer a "sentimental Tommy" playing, even to himself, his comedy of life—he was a man, awake all in a moment, bitterly awake to a neglected duty and a tarnished ideal.

His disappointment in love, his being an object of censure, all this receded into the background, as he faced himself. All at once the world and its valuations troubled him little.

How was he going to get back to himself—to rid himself of this new Frankenstein.

And he knew in a moment just how. Out of the shattered remnants of his self-respect he would build a fresh life—no, two lives.

Thank heaven, he had sufficient means for it. He would take the boy away and give him the best he could—all of those things that Martha had longed for. And in the end it would be they two together against the world—

Somewhere underneath, among the forgotten things, a faint spark of fatherhood stirred in him. He would get *himself* back—but he also meant to build the ideal anew for—his son.

So thinking, he reached Martha's door.

Rita Ashe opened it to him and this made it harder than he had expected, but he saw it through.

"I've come," he said hoarsely, "to look after the boy. I think he will need me."

"Yes," she said gravely, "he's cried himself to sleep, poor little fellow. But when he

wakes he will be *glad*. Won't you come in and wait?"

She held the door wide and he passed in silently.



## CHAPTER XXII

IN WHICH OLD SERAPHY REVEALS HER HEART, AND THE  
SPRING LADY MAKES A DISCOVERY

THE two women came up the hill very slowly.

They came from the little graveyard where Martha had been buried an hour before, and, each busied with her own thoughts, cared little to speak.

But at the hilltop the younger woman wheeled and stood still, looking backward at the valley scene. It was a fair little world that lay at her feet—never lovelier than now in early June, when the rocky hill-slopes were dappled with velvety masses of sweet-fern and great clumps of blushing laurel, like giant bridal nosegays. Except for the laurel it looked just as she had seen it a dozen times—the sunny river, the church spires, the leafy line of maples that marked the one real street

—and above a soft velvet sky of blue—with the hint of cloud and storm-mischief to the west.

“Sweethills,” she said, looking at it. “After all, Seraphy, I was right. It is worth loving. I knew it to-day when Martha’s old friends came to her grave with their flowers. She came back to them at death. It’s a stern spirit—but, after all, it’s right. We can’t break away and make laws for ourselves. It’s all against it—civilization. We’ve got to live by the rules men make for men. We grow lax in the cities—with our standards. But if man must keep his laws effective, he *must* be stern. It’s only being consistent— We *must* act it—even if in our heart we’d like not to. Martha was an outlaw—that was all—it was hard—but she did break the law. I know some of them loved her, after all. I could see it to-day. Perhaps it’s this narrow spirit that counts strongest in the end—keeps more of us straight. It’s the little unbending places, like Sweethills, that all together make a mighty force for right living. It’s our *little places*

and their stern standards that are back of all the rest."

"Anyhow, Martha's at peace now—an' little Rob looked out for. Everything's right side up at last."

"Everything," agreed the other, but her voice was listless, and Seraphy looked at her sharply.

"You're all worn out—a-settin' up so, nights. You'd ought to let us sole-leather folks do it. You'll just lay in bed fer a week now and *sleep*."

"I am tired," said Rita slowly. They had reached their house now and she went in to the homely little sitting-room.

She sank down wearily into the old wind-sor armchair.

"I'll make you a cup of tea right away," said Seraphy; "funerals ain't the most heartenin' scenes." But the girl demurred.

"I don't want tea, Seraphy—not just now. I want to talk to you first—to tell you. Then—you may make me my last cup of tea—"

Seraphy had already got a blue cup and

saucer from the old highboy in the corner. She set them down with a little deliberate click and turned sharply.

"What did you say—what do you mean?"

"I mean—I have to give the house up. I wrote to the agent several weeks ago. And to-morrow I must pack—and go back. I'm sorry. I ought to have told you before—but somehow I couldn't. I—I don't like to leave you, Seraphy. You've been so good to me."

The old woman's face looked strangely white.

"You don't mean"—she had a little trouble with her breath—"you ain't thinkin' of leavin' *me*?"

"But I've got to, Seraphy. I—you understand—I *can't* stay any longer. I must go back to the city. I couldn't very well take you along—" She tried to speak lightly, but her voice faltered in spite of her.

Seraphy did not look up for a moment, then she said slowly, "What makes—why be you goin'? Don't you—care to stay?"

"I'd love to," said the girl simply, "but it's—money. I can't afford it."

Seraphy breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"So that's it. Money. Now s'pose you listen to me. I got a little myself—an' there's my place, not much, but somethin'. An' the tenants is goin' first o' next month. Ef you can't meet the rent here, what you say to you an' me goin' there a while? S' long's I've got anything, we could manage—an' I ain't an easy person to give in. The garden'd furnish plenty to eat—an' I can chore around a little—"

Rita uttered a little cry and ran to her.

"Seraphy—you old dear—do you think I'd live on *you*?"

"I'd be real glad to have you." There was a quiver in Seraphy's voice and suddenly the younger woman threw her arms around her.

"I believe you. You're the *kindest* thing. But I couldn't—I mustn't. I haven't any money, but I couldn't do *that*. I'll go away and make some—"

"How'll ye make it?"

"I don't know—"

"And what's the need when we could git along? Look a' here." Her harsh old face worked with sudden emotion. "I ain't got nobody on God's earth to set store by. Once I had a little sister—a white little thing with hair like yourn—and the Lord didn't even leave me *her*. All my years has been spent workin'—just drudgin' along—till you come. An'—you're so pretty an' gentle-like—it's b'en just fun to work for you. I'd work my fingers to the bone fer ye. I don't care what folks thinks or says. If you'd only stay with me—if you only wouldn't leave me. Seems like there won't be nothin' left if you go away," she said miserably.

"I couldn't forget you, Seraphy—ever." Rita was crying now. "Heaven knows I need some one—I feel so wretched. But what can I do—"

"You could try it. You could wait a while an' see. If it's only money—you won't want fer a livin'. Afterward—when you're real strong—then if you had to. 'Tain't as though

you need care about folks. I won't—if you'll stay with me. I'll take good care of you—and you can stay close with me till everything's over—”

Slowly Rita's hand dropped from the old woman's arm, and a curious transfixed look crept into her eyes, the color stole from her face.

“What do you—mean? ‘Till—everything's over’?” She faltered and put out a hand to the back of her chair for support.

A strange, pitying, half-wondering expression came into Seraphy's rugged face. She took a step toward the girl, her hands outstretched tenderly.

“Don't you know what I mean?” she asked in a low voice; “you poor child—you ain't deceivin' *yourself*, be you? Or just tryin' to deceive me— Don't you think I've knowed long ago—hadn't you ought to tell me, dearie—hadn't you ought to tell old Seraphy somethin'?”

The other neither spoke nor moved for a little. Then her pale lips moved as though she

would speak, but no words came, and suddenly a great trembling seized her and she swayed as though she would faint.

"So it's—*true*," she whispered as though to herself.

Mechanically she turned to where her ulster had fallen on a chair. She picked it up with fumbling fingers and tried to draw it round her.

Seraphy watched her, keen-eyed and anxious.

"What be you goin' to do?" she asked hoarsely; "you ain't angry with me fer speakin' plain? You ain't a-goin' away *now* be you? Not when I can help you? You ain't angry—? *We* can understand each other, can't we—an' leave other folks say what they please?"

She clasped her rough old hands together until the sinews whitened through the gnarled flesh.

The other looked at her strangely.

"I—I couldn't talk about it now—Sera-phy." Her breath almost failed her. "I must



think—I'm not angry—things aren't as you think them— Only let me think—”

She brushed past the old woman suddenly and moved toward the door.

“You ain't goin' *out*? An' you so tired— an' they's a storm a-comin' soon. I'll make your tea. You'd best stay here.” Seraphy shrilled the words at her, a sudden agony of alarm in her face. “Don't go out now—I c'n hear it thunderin'—”

She made as if to follow, but Rita motioned her back with an imperative hand.

“I want to be alone, Seraphy—I just want to think—” Before her white face, and strangely shining eyes, Seraphy fell back.

She watched the slim figure disappear through the garden into the road with a heavy heart.

“Can't be she *knowed*,” she muttered. “Lord God,” she whispered, “fix it all right fer her—let it come right in the end.”

Mechanically she picked up the blue and white cup and put it quietly into its place.

Twenty minutes after, dark riders of cloud moved across the window-panes, and a heavy wind, blowing from westward, thrashed the elm tree at the gate, tore from the creepers and bushes in the garden a myriad petals, white and pink, to winnow them in endless eddies across path and lawn. Far off across the river the thick, yellow-gray fog meant rain, while from the cloud-bank piling up outside the rumbling of thunder grew more and more frequent. It was apt to be damp in the house after a storm.

With deft nervous fingers Seraphy laid a fire ready for the match, drew close the wind-sor chair, placed dressing-gown and house shoes in readiness. And between whiles, her anxious eyes explored the darkening valley road, watched the keen wind whip the distant river into sullen combers.

It grew so dark shortly she lighted the lamp, and to be quite ready, spread the cloth, measured the tea, put out bread and cake and current jelly and thinly sliced ham.

But her hands trembled as she worked.

When she had finished she stood close by the window and waited. It was so black she could hardly see—save for an occasional flash of lightning. Presently there came a quick angry spatter of drops, and in a minute a heavy curtain of rain blotted out everything.

“If I knowed where to find her,” she whispered.

At nine o'clock the rain stopped and the storm dropped back with sullen grumblings, leaving a black soaking world outside.

No lights showed save a tiny speck that marked the Sweethills station.

Still Seraphy waited. When an hour had passed, she turned dully and went over to the unlighted fireplace. Her eyes shone with a strange haggard light.

“She ain’t come back,” she said; “she ain’t come back.” And suddenly she slipped down into the chair and commenced to cry with harsh unaccustomed sobs.

## CHAPTER XXIII

WHEREIN THE VOICE OF THE STORM, SINGING IN THE  
PINES, BRINGS A GREAT PEACE, AND THE SPRING  
LADY COMES SAFELY HOME

THE wind in the pine trees first told of the storm's nearness. There is something majestic in the softest of the pine tree's whispers, but its storm-song is more than that. It has something of the quality of God in it; of a mighty and awful voice speaking from eternal spaces.

When the first swift whispering came, the girl looked up from where she lay on the pine-needles and saw that the sun had ceased to shine through the lace-like edge of the wood. It was dim always here in the cool aloofness of the pine wood, but the dusk of it began to give place to something heavier, like a velvety pall of night, and the sound of thunder reached

her. It grew cooler also. The air-currents, moving among the slim sentinel trees, touched her icily. A storm was coming.

From where she lay, close to the Great Mother, cushioned on a carpet of yielding softness, woven of infinite weathered needles, soft cobwebs and fine silt of the earth, she watched it coming and was glad.

After the swift rush of emotion that had overpowered her; that had driven her through long miles of unthinking, unheeding action, she rested now, weary, detached in spirit from all her past life—from even the great fact that had come into her life. She was like some curious unconcerned spectator as, cheek on hand, she watched the somber threatening sky creep up over the wood and saw the lightning zigzag down.

The song of the pines, mighty and indomitable, was like grateful music to her. Neither darkness nor storm troubled her—nor the broad sweep of the mountainside where she nestled alone. This was what she wanted. Presently when she had rested and the storm

was above she would come into the fuller understanding she sought, and would know what to do.

After a little a drop of water pierced through the thick shelter and she knew it must be raining outside; she could feel it like an impalpable veil of moisture creeping into the wood. So she fastened her coat about her and crept close to the foot of a tree. And suddenly, while the voice of the storm rang through the trees, she faced her reality at last; the voice of her heart spoke clearly and fully. It was as though she saw into the Eternal Heart that beats beneath every troubled experience, and she knew no fear.

This thing which had come to her, which had lifted her out of herself, out of her constricted frivolous life, brought with it now a sudden clearer vision. Much that had meant nothing, or at most perplexity, grew rich with meaning.

This was Nature's gift that was to come, and it had led her back to Nature. But it was not all hers—not hers alone! She thought

of her husband and pondered what it would mean to him—

There was no one of her friends to whom it would have been welcome—nor apparently to their men. Herself—a little while since! She had always been afraid!

Perhaps that was why she had had to come away—to get close to Earth and its great rebirth and know the true meaning of life—the great cycle, birth and death, which is only the step to rebirth.

And Larry, her husband! The husband she really loved. He must know too! No matter what had gone before—this was theirs in common. It was his right to know, to have a part in the sacred life-plan.

She had known little religion, little communion of the spirit, but the spirit spoke now. Her heart sang with a joy mightier than the storm wind that rocked the pine-boughs. She looked up at them and suddenly she felt close to God, the God of Storm and Stress, of Sun and Peace—and the fathomless comfort came to her that she was in safe-keeping.

## THE VOICE OF THE STORM 283

It was eleven o'clock when the Sweethills operator in his tower heard a knocking on his lower door and stumbled sleepily down, light in hand, to find a woman there. She was storm splashed from head to foot, her garments sodden with rain and mud. Beneath her tumbled hair her face was pallid, her eyes were bright.

She wanted to send a telegram—to New York, she said. Would he send it through for her?

He looked at her curiously as she wrote her message on the yellow pad.

He tried to make a little conversation. It was a bad night, he thought. She agreed, but was non-committal about anything else. She would have been pretty he thought if she had not been so pale and her eyes so peculiar.

He thought about her for some time when she had left. He was a stranger in the village and had never heard of the Spring Lady.

He was the last, but one, who should see her in that rôle. When she had bidden him good night, she went on through the darkness



—and she went as she had come into Sweet-hills, afoot, wet and weary.

It was impenetrably black. Every step or two, she sank into a morass of mud, or was drenched with cold water from the thick trees that lined the way. But she stumbled on, trusting blindly to find her way back to the familiar hill road.

But after a while her strength failed and she could go no farther.

Through the darkness to her right, she made out a darker blurred mass, a house presumably. She turned in toward it desperately.

As she did so a light flashed out from an upper window and she recognized the place. The old Franklin house—off on the edge of town, far removed from her cottage and Seraphy! Surely she might find refuge here. She was barely able to reach the porch, to tap the rusty old knocker. After a moment, she heard feet descending the stairs, the grating of the key in the lock, a cautious turning of the knob.

Then against the lighted hall, an old face looked out.

"What is it? My lands—"

"I—I've been out—in the storm," faltered the girl; "may I come in—to rest?"

"My lands, yes," the other trembled, and she threw wide the door to the draggled figure.

It was such a hall as she had imagined. Old-fashioned, oaken, comfortable, an antlered deer-head above the rack, a tall clock in the corner. Beyond brown curtains, she saw the dim forms of the big easy chairs she had dreamed of, the spacious lines of homely comfortable rooms.

She sank wearily into the big hall chair.

"I'm not fit—to come in. So—tired—" The old woman was trying to loosen the wet coat.

"I'll get you blankets an' a wrapper. An' some pepper tea, right off—" she was saying. "We'll get you right to bed—"

Rita smiled at her faintly.

"I knew you'd take me in. You're so kind,—and I don't even know your name."

"Debby Wheeler," the woman answered, bringing a great horse-blanket from the closet; "you put this round you an' I'll take your shoes off—"

"I thought—your name was *Franklin*."

"There ain't no Franklins—that is, only one—an' *he* hardly counts. I'm jest the caretaker. I lived here with old Mis' Franklin an' when she died an' the estate was settled, I was hired to stay on. The Sweethills Franklins are all dead—but there was a New York fam'ly—an' it went to them—or, to the boy. He used to come here when he was a little feller—but he ain't come sence. He's too tony I guess—but it's all his—"

Suddenly the girl sat erect and pushed aside the old ministering hands.

"Did you say—what is his name? This New York Franklin—*whose* place is this—"

But even before the other answered, she knew. Forgotten, carelessly uttered sentences stirred in her memory. Unheeded

things—the old aunt's place up-state, where boyhood visits had been made.

“It's Mr. Laurence Franklin—the New York owner—I seen him once when he was little—”

“Oh,” cried the girl, “then I've come—*home*, haven't I?—and I *may* come in and—rest. You see—I'm—*Mrs.* Laurence Franklin—”

## CHAPTER XXIV

### LARRY

WHEN the afternoon train came into the Sweethills station there was an unwonted crowd on the platform.

The congestion was thickest about two individuals who were obviously about to embark and whose condition was equally manifest by the amount of white ribbons and rice and old shoes present, by the profusion of cigars being smoked in and about the station, and the arch and knowing glances of the feminine contingent.

For Sweethills' public man, man of eloquence, man of position and popularity had taken unto himself a wife, at last. The ceremony had been performed with some haste, if not secrecy, owing to an unfortunate episode which befell the groom some days earlier. It

was the idea of the groom to depart without ceremony and return only after a reasonable retirement had permitted public memory to dim.

But somewhere a slip had occurred—possibly the bride herself had been indiscreet. At any rate there were many abroad to note the fashionable lines of the new costume, and the blushing contour of her face beneath the cloud of violet veiling. It can not be said that the new Mrs. Vessey looked unhappy amid the circle of jesting, badgering, and (here and there) derisive villagers, but the bridegroom looked ill-at-ease. He was paler than his wont, and his statesmanly pose and attire were somewhat marred by the effect of great strips of court-plaster on his jaw and the grapelike purple of one eye.

When the train came to a standstill he fairly shook his tormentors off and ran for shelter.

And so intent were the bridal persecutors that in the absorption of the moment, the questing eye, usually so keen upon the newly arrived, missed all count of a man who alighted

from the smoker, and turned briskly away toward the village.

He was not of a type common to Sweethills, even as a visitor. He was a man in the middle thirties, slender, well-set-up, alert and poised in manner. His clothing was the expression of a sartorial standard widely different from village experience, but more than this, by some odd quirk of manner or carriage, he suggested the city atmosphere.

But above all things, pervading his dress and manner, both face and body betrayed anxiety, some vital worry. It lay in his slight frown, in the tired eyes, the line of the shoulders. It seemed to be accentuated as he hurried on. When he had forsaken the main street and reached a familiar turning he was almost running.

More than twenty-five years had passed since Laurence Franklin had played in the streets of Sweethills as a boy. The experience, overlaid by so long a time, laid away in lavender, as it were, almost forgot beneath

the interests that consumed him since, awoke suddenly quick and vivid as he came in sight of the Franklin house.

So little it had changed he might have been that boy of yesterday, with his hand on the opening gate, and an odd lump formed in his throat. The house looked smaller, the hemlock grove rustier, but beyond this—! There was the old locust where he had fastened his swing; and the little side door he had used to slip through on his fishing jaunts. A dozen memories flocked all at once, of that long-ago child whose feet knew the kiss of cool grass but who had since trodden only the paved ways and who had forgot.

Then his anxiety gripped him again and his hand was on the door-latch—his eyes on the old Debby waiting for him.

He knew where to find her. It had been his aunt Abigail's room, and it was "unchanged" Debby told him.

A nice old room with a quaint "bow window," old-fashioned, satin wood furnishing and



chintz curtains with peacocks walking up and down.

But when he reached the door he hesitated a moment. Then like a man bracing himself he turned the knob and entered.

She was sitting in a low chair in the sunny window, a great silver bowl, filled with early roses, beside her. From somewhere Debby had produced a quaint old-fashioned negligee of cashmere—an odd turquoise shade—and this with the great braids of burnished hair falling on her shoulders gave her an almost barbaric brightness.

There was nothing pale or wan in her face as he had expected—only a sudden riotous flush that matched the roses, as she turned to him. Her hand went up to her throat with the familiar little gesture.

But he did not move. He stood and looked at her silently and all of the pain of the past months spoke in his eyes for him. Reading it, the color drained from her face suddenly.

Then he moved to her, half-blindly, and took her in his arms,

"Rita," he whispered, "my girl."

She began to cry.

"Larry—my poor boy."

He held her close and when she had wept a while he tried to silence her with little petting gestures.

"There—there," he said.

She looked up at him and smiled faintly and saw how ravaged his face was—how wretched, and with a little cry she clung close to him.

"Larry," she said again, "can you forgive me—ever?"

"There's no question of that," he said hoarsely, "but—oh, Rita—these months! And you never told me why. I—I could only *wait*—God!"

He struck the table savagely with his hand, and his face worked harshly.

"I didn't know, myself," she faltered; "I thought I hated you—that we had ceased to care. Life didn't seem worth while—but I know better now—it was something else. That's why I sent for you. To—to tell you what it means—Larry—will you care—what

will you say?—Larry—we're going to be different from all our friends—*we're going to have a child—*"

She had thrust him back from her with both hands and peered up into his face. He grew pale before her glance.

"You're—not mistaken," he said.

She could feel him tremble under her hand.

"You mean—you'll like it?" she whispered.

"I've—always hoped for it, Rita."

"You never said anything," she cried.

"No—I—thought you never cared—and we never had time to talk over things. We were always going somewhere!"

"That's what I want you to understand—that's why I came away. It seemed as if hands drew me away—away from the noise and distraction—to the country, to a *quiet* place. I got so tired, Larry. And I thought you'd not understand."

"You never tried me," he said.

"No," she answered, and suddenly she cried again, and he stroked her soft hair. "When

you're sure you've forgiven me—wholly—I will tell you all about it—if you care—”

He seated himself in the big chair and she slipped down beside his knee, and held his hand in hers.

“Go back—to that first day,” he said.

So she tried to tell him—now halting at a word, now speaking swiftly with vivid phrase—all that had befallen her. Now and then as she relived the last two months his hand tightened over hers.

“I’m glad I came,” she said presently, “in spite of the pain I caused you—will you let me be glad, Larry?— For something tells me we will know each other better for it than we ever did—and—I know—how much I love you—you care for that—don’t you?”

“I—*care*,” he said huskily.

They sat a long time in silence, for the first time in real communion of the spirit. And it seemed to both as if an infinite happiness brooded in the room.

At twilight Debby Wheeler stole in softly with a tea-tray and slipped out again. It

brought them back to reality and Rita poured her husband's tea and fussed hospitably with the tea-things.

"You're looking so well," he said, "I scarcely know you—you've got positively husky—and what a biceps,—lord!"

"I'm *strong*," she boasted proudly; "I've become a hill-woman and a gardener and all sorts of things."

He looked at her face against the fading sunlight. His own was in shadow and she could not see the kindling light in his eyes.

"You're *all right*, Rita—no matter what you are—*for me*. But I'm thinking what will we do with you back in the city—you'll miss these things—"

She looked at him quickly, startled.

"But I'm not going back to the city—You don't want me to?"

"You mean you'd like to stay? Of course, for a while—"

"For a long while," she interrupted quickly. Suddenly she rose and drew him with her to the bay-window.

"Why can't we stay, Larry? Isn't this place yours? You played here when you were little—wouldn't you like to come back, to live *relaxed*?"

"You'd like me to turn farmer—"

"Wouldn't you like to try it? Is the other so worth while?"

"But I might be a failure; habit's strong—it's been so many years. Though Lord knows I need something different—something to humanize me—to *rest* me. The pace has all but killed me lately."

"That's it, Larry. We could give it a trial, anyway. I'd help so hard—and there's the other thing—think what it will mean to look out on the lawn and see the child—our little kiddie playing among the dandelions with old Seraphy—"

"The little beggar," he whispered.

"And afterward—if we liked—we could go back, when we'd learned a better way to live—and you could teach it all the things you know, fishing and swimming, and I'd teach it the things I've learned in the woods— Oh,

Larry, I *want* so for us to be a natural man and woman, instead of two lay figures—”

He pressed her to him and kissed her glowing cheeks.

“We’ll give it a try,” he vowed. “I’m all for your game, Rita.”

“Look, Larry,” she said, “how pink it is in the west. It’s going to be clear to-morrow. *Our* to-morrow!”

THE END







Pulver

Spring lady

